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Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l - INVITATION



NATO and EU long-term commitment to Afghanistan

Hosted by: MEP Wolfgang Kreissl-Dörfler & MEP Norbert Neuser

Speakers:

- Willy Fautré, Director, Human Rights Without Frontiers International
- H.E. Homayoun Tandar, Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to the EU and Belgium
- A Senior Representative from NATO
- Paul Godfrey, Afghan Desk, European External Action Service
- Shada Islam, Head of Policy, Friends of Europe

Tuesday, 27 March 2012

Reception: 18.00–18.30

Conference: 18.30–20.00

Room: ASP 1G2

European Parliament, Brussels

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Op-ed

The Euro-Atlantic Community's responsibility to a long-term commitment to human rights in Afghanistan

The media often shows a negative picture of the presence of Western forces and civil organizations in Afghanistan. Only the negative and spectacular events are reported while the positive and less visible achievements remain largely unnoticed and unreported.

In the last ten years, the EU, European donors and NGOs as well as NATO have significantly contributed to the improvement and safeguard of human rights, women's rights and gender equality in Afghanistan, as well as to humanitarian assistance.

One area among many others is women's rights and school education, especially for girls. For years, this program has been facing significant obstacles: burning of schoolhouses, kidnappings, threats, forced school closings and the killing or injuring of students and teachers. "Stop teaching and running the girls' school, otherwise you will be slaughtered," was the message to the headmaster in Logar, south of Kabul when unknown masked gunmen took him out of his house late one evening and beat him up.

Despite all these difficulties, there have been enormous gains since 2001. Under the Taliban, the majority of girls' schools were closed and gross enrollment fell from 32% to 6%. In the early years after the fall of the Taliban regime, education was a top priority and the Back to School campaign, launched in 2002, significantly expanded enrollment from approximately 900,000 in 2000 to 6.7 million in 2009. For girls, the increase was even more dramatic: from only a few thousand under the Taliban to 2.7 million involved in 2011. However, still only about 40% of girls have access to education. The reasons are multiple: lack of facilities, school buildings, trained teachers, especially female teachers, as well as various forms of intimidation, threats and physical attacks. The job is not finished.

However, the improvements of Afghan women's rights gained since the beginning of this century are now at risk of getting lost in the global bargain for peace with the Taliban and other armed opposition groups.

The future of a school education system open to the world remains uncertain. Will secular education offered by the state schools prevail over privately imparted religious schools aiming at indoctrinating young boys and girls after the departure of the Western forces? This is an important issue that needs proactive involvement.

The EU and its member states have a responsibility toward Afghan women as improvement and protection of their rights was sold as a positive outcome of the international intervention in 2001. Though, with the prospect of progressive downsizing of international forces, women's hard won gains are fragile and could easily slip away. This trend is already visible. While in parliament, a quota system put into place in 2005 has enabled 69 women to become MPs, there is now just one female minister compared to three in 2004 and the number of women in the civil service has dropped from 31 percent in 2006 to 18.5 percent in 2010.

The international community must ensure that women's rights are not sacrificed on the altar of peace and that they have a strong voice in any future negotiations and political settlements. The international community must support expanded civic education programs to raise awareness of women's rights at community level and support efforts

to improve female leadership. The political representation of women in elected bodies and government institutions must be enhanced at all levels. Efforts must also be intensified to promote their access to education, health, justice, and other basic services. The misuse of religious beliefs to reduce women's and human rights must be fought against with determination.

In the 20th century, Afghan women had started a long and bumpy march to emancipation and empowerment which was interrupted by the rule of the Taliban and is still under threat. In 1928, Queen Soraya lifted her veil in public, the first time an Afghan woman had ever done so. In 1953, General Mohammed Daub abolished the wearing of the purdah (practice of secluding women from public view) when he became Prime Minister. In 1964, the constitution gave women the right to vote and allowed them to enter politics. In 1978, women made up over 60% of the 10,000 students at Kabul University. This age must come back for Afghan women.

Primarily and ultimately, the responsibility to safeguard human rights rests with the Afghan government but the long-term support of the Euro-Atlantic community until and after 2014 remains crucial. Raising awareness of public opinions and policy-makers is both essential and urgent if we do not want ten years of efforts and billions of EUR and USD to be wasted.

Willy Fautré, director of *Human Rights Without Frontiers* (Brussels)