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Human Rights Watch

Afghanistan: Rein in Abusive Militias and Afghan Local Police

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Kabul – Militias and some units of the new US-backed Afghan Local Police are committing serious human rights abuses, but the government is not providing proper oversight or holding them accountable, Human Rights Watch said in a report released today. The Afghan government and the US should sever ties with irregular armed groups and take immediate steps to create properly trained and vetted security forces that are held accountable for their actions.

The 102-page report, “[‘Just Don’t Call It a Militia:’ Impunity, Militias and the ‘Afghan Local Police.’](#)” documents serious abuses, such as killings, rape, arbitrary detention, abductions, forcible land grabs, and illegal raids by irregular armed groups in northern Kunduz province and the Afghan Local Police (ALP) force in Baghlan, Herat, and Uruzgan provinces. The Afghan government has failed to hold these forces to account, fostering future abuses and generating support for the Taliban and other opposition forces, Human Rights Watch found.

“The Afghan government has responded to the insurgency by reactivating militias that threaten the lives of ordinary Afghans” said [Brad Adams](#), Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “Kabul and Washington need to make a clean break from supporting abusive and destabilizing militias to have any hope of a viable, long-term security strategy.”

As part of its exit strategy, the US military is training and mentoring the year-old village-level ALP force. In March 2011, the commander of the international forces in Afghanistan at the time, Gen. David Petraeus, told the US Senate that the ALP is “arguably the most critical element in our effort to help Afghanistan develop the capability to secure itself.”

Cases investigated by Human Rights Watch raise serious concerns about Afghan government and international efforts to arm, fund, vet, and hold accountable irregular armed groups. In Kunduz province, militias have spread quickly in recent years. Their increase is a deliberate policy of the National Directorate of Security (NDS), Afghanistan's intelligence agency, which has reactivated militia networks primarily through the Shura-e-Nazar ("Supervisory Council" of the north) and Jamiat-i-Islami networks, and provided money and weapons without sufficient oversight.

"Just Don't Call It a Militia" is based on over 120 interviews with victims of abuses and family members, village elders, witnesses, nongovernmental organization workers, Afghan security, human rights and government officials, foreign military officials and diplomats, journalists, and Afghanistan analysts.

In most cases of serious abuses documented by Human Rights Watch in Kunduz, no action had been taken against those responsible. For example, in Khanabad district in August 2009, a militia killed four men due to a family dispute. An NDS official confirmed that the police could not arrest anyone involved in the killing because of the militia commander's connection to the provincial chief of police and a local strongman who is closely involved with abusive armed groups. A prosecutor who is also the father of one of the men killed told Human Rights Watch, "No one has helped me, and I work for the government, so what about the other people? Who will listen to them?"

"Patronage links to senior officials in the local security forces and the central government allow supposedly pro-government militias to terrorize local communities and operate with impunity," Adams said.

At the same time, the rapid build-up of the ALP has contributed to concerns about whether it will be a law-abiding force, Human Rights Watch said. Created in July 2010 at the behest of the US, the force is supposed to supplement the Afghan national army and police at the community and village levels. The Afghan Local Police is seen by the US military as a way to address the pressures of trying to hand over control of security to the Afghan government by 2014.

Village *shuras* (councils) are tasked to nominate and vet members of the ALP, whose units report to the district chief of police. Units trained for only 21 days are being armed and deployed in areas where there is limited Afghan national army and police presence. As of August, 7,000 men had been recruited to the force. Plans are under way to arm and train up to 30,000.

Afghan and US officials told Human Rights Watch that the ALP has improved security in some areas. In some communities, local residents interviewed by Human Rights Watch welcomed the new force and cited improvements in security. But other residents said the new police had not been properly vetted, citing criminal and insurgent elements being absorbed into the force. Many complained that the ALP, like other irregular armed groups, is not held accountable when implicated in abuses.

Although the force is fairly new, Human Rights Watch documented several serious abuses by its members. In February in Shindand district in Herat province, for example, an ALP unit raided

several houses, stealing belongings, beating residents, and illegally detaining six men. In another case, the ALP have been accused of beating teenage boys and hammering nails into the feet of one boy, but have not been arrested.

In Baghlan province, former fighters with the Islamist Hezb-i-Islami, including a local strongman, Nur-ul Haq, have been recruited into the ALP. Haq and his men have been implicated in killings, land-grabs, and abductions. But the police have refused to investigate the allegations, telling Human Rights Watch that they are unable to question suspected ALP members due to their connections with powerful government officials and US special forces. In April, four armed ALP members in Baghlan abducted a 13-year-old boy on his way home from the bazaar and took him to the house of an ALP sub-commander, where he was gang raped. He escaped the next day. Although the assailants' identities were well known, no arrests have taken place.

In Uruzgan province in December 2010, a local strongman, Neda Muhammed, detained six elders after they refused to agree to provide men to the ALP. Some ALP members in Khas Uruzgan have been implicated by local officials and residents in illegal raids, beatings, and forcible collection of *ushr* (informal tax).

Afghan and international proponents of the ALP point to safeguards, such as the Afghan Interior Ministry control over the ALP, village *shura* vetting of members, and training and mentoring by US special operations forces. But the national police lack adequate command and control structures, and the ALP often far outnumber the national police in the districts where they operate, Human Rights Watch said. Interior Ministry officials have also conceded to Human Rights Watch that such safeguards had also been promised for many of the previous community defense initiatives that ended in failure.

Previous programs to create local defense forces have been hijacked by local strongmen or by ethnic or political factions, spreading fear, fuelling vendettas, and in some areas even playing into the hands of Taliban insurgents, Human Rights Watch said. One example was the Afghan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP), created in 2006, which was barely trained, underwent minimal vetting, had poorly defined rules of engagement, had high levels of infiltration, and was highly corrupt. Another, the Afghan Public Protection Force (AP3) in Wardak province, was hijacked by local strongmen and became involved in beatings and intimidation.

“While there is a need for more security at the village level, the Afghan and US governments should be very careful not to repeat the mistakes of militias past,” Adams said. “If quick corrections are not made, the ALP could end up being just another militia that causes more problems than it cures.”

Human Rights Watch called on the US and Afghan governments to avoid the rush to set up new units of the ALP around the country without proper vetting, oversight, and accountability mechanisms, as has occurred with some units.

Human Rights Watch also urged the Afghan government to investigate all allegations of abuse by militias and the ALP, to allocate adequate resources to investigate complaints, and to create

an external complaints body to act on reports of abuses by the ALP and other police forces.

“Pressure to reduce international troop levels should not be at the expense of the rights of Afghans,” Adams said. “The Afghan government and its supporters need to understand that insecurity does not come only from the insurgency. Poor governance, corruption, human rights abuses, and impunity for government-affiliated forces all are drivers of the insurgency, and these issues need to be addressed if true stability is to come to Afghanistan.”