



موسسه مصونیت و کاهش بحران
SAFETY AND RISK MITIGATION ORGANIZATION

State of Human Rights Defenders in Afghanistan
Year 2021



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📍 Taimani, Kabul
Afghanistan

Executive Summary

- This annual report provides a summary of the situation for Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) in Afghanistan in 2021: a year that will forever be marked in history as that in which the Taliban retook power. Over the course of 2021, a total of 37 activists and media workers were killed in targeted attacks. After 20 years of human rights advancement, the Taliban have completely closed any space for dissent. They have launched a campaign to persecute and silence critical voices, particularly women. HRDs and Civil Society Activists (CSAs) face an extremely hostile operating environment marred by intimidation, killings, arbitrary detention and the disappearance of outspoken male and female activists and journalists.
- This report is divided into two sections: the first section covers events between January 2021 until 14 August 2021, and the second details the period from the Taliban takeover of Kabul on 15 August 2021 until the end of December 2021. While there is an obvious need to focus on the situation post-August 2021, SRMO sees as part of its mandate ensuring that crimes committed against HRDs by different actors in the earlier part of the year are not forgotten in the chaos of the Taliban takeover. All violations against HRDs must be kept on the record, investigated and prosecuted.

January to 14 August

- The wave of targeted killings of civil society activists and human rights defenders that escalated in late 2020 continued at an alarming pace in the first 8 months of 2021. Between January and mid-August, SRMO documented 21 cases of violence against HRDs, CSAs and their family members. These cases include the targeted killings of two WHRDs (in Baghlan and Farah) and the kidnap and murder of the son of the head of the Mazar-e Sharif office of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC).
- Eleven CSAs were killed, along with three family members. A further three CSAs were seriously injured in attempted killings, while two more CSAs escaped injury after failed assassination attempts. In addition, 10 media workers died in targeted killings in the first 7.5 months of the year, while several more were killed in crossfire in conflict zones.
- The vast majority of targeted killings between January and mid-August involved shootings, with smaller numbers of cases involving improvised explosive devices (IEDs); at least four targeted killings in Kabul involved the use of magnetic IEDs or 'sticky bombs' attached to the victims' cars. This type of attack often causes additional casualties including drivers, other passengers, and bystanders.
- Violence against activists took place countrywide, but Kabul and Nangarhar saw the largest numbers of incidents.
- In the period from January to 14 August, the majority of attacks on activists went unclaimed. This continued a pattern from 2020 where the Taliban no longer openly claimed responsibility for attacks on civil society, likely because they were involved in negotiations and wanted to be able to claim plausible deniability. However, the Taliban were very likely responsible for many of these incidents; the group continued to issue threats civil society activists, were able to operate countrywide despite ongoing military operations against them, and had a clear motivation to drown out independent voices that were critical of Taliban human rights abuses.
- In addition to CSAs and HRDs, several other groups of professionals were subjected to a similar pattern of attacks. These included legal professionals, humanitarian workers, and religious scholars. For example, seven legal professionals (including judges, prosecutors and lawyers) were assassinated in incidents in Kabul, Kandahar, Ghazni and Logar.

15 August to 31 December

- Since the Taliban takeover, HRDs are not only experiencing the collapse of the state framework and legal protection mechanisms within which they operated, but are also at direct threat of retaliatory actions for their work. Taliban claims that they would govern in a more inclusive manner have been quickly and fully contradicted by their actions, as illustrated in a table of the group's words vs actions set out in Annex 1.
- Since the Taliban takeover, SRMO has documented 11 targeted killings of HRDs, CSAs and journalists, with another media worker seriously injured in an attempted killing and many more injured in beatings. The targeted killings included the deaths of at least four Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) who had arranged and participated in demonstrations against the Taliban in Mazar-e Sharif in Balkh province. The women had reportedly been called with promises of a seat on an evacuation flight; they subsequently went missing and their bodies were found several days later.
- Three CSAs were killed in separate incidents in Nangarhar, while two activists were killed by Taliban gunfire during a demonstration in Nangarhar's provincial capital Jalalabad in the early days of Taliban rule. Journalists have been killed in Kabul and Nangarhar, while another journalist was seriously injured in an attack in the former.
- Relatives of victims and local civil society networks accused the Taliban of being responsible for at least three targeted killings of civil society activists since 15 August. Nine other fatal attacks on activists or media workers were carried out by 'unknown gunmen'; given the Taliban's almost total territorial control it is likely the group's footsoldiers were responsible for some if not all of these incidents.
- All 12 detentions of civil society and media workers recorded in SRMO's database between 15 August and 31 December 2021 were carried out by the Taliban. In addition to these cases of individuals being detained, there are frequent and well documented reports of journalists being detained and beaten by Taliban security personnel while they are reporting, often while covering demonstrations. Sometimes journalists have been beaten as a means of dispersing them; on other occasions journalists have been beaten and tortured in Taliban custody after being detained.
- While SRMO's main focus is on civil society, the human rights situation since August has also been marked by a wave of extra judicial killings and disappearances of former security force personnel. Although denied by the Taliban, many of these deaths are likely to be the result of revenge killings by the new Taliban de facto authorities despite the 'general amnesty' it issued in August. In one such incident in October, the bodies of 21 former police/NDS were found dead with gunshot wounds in Daykundi Province.

Recommendations

- SRMO urges the international community to pressure the Taliban to ensure the safety of HRDs and civil society. Taliban leaders must be pressured to stop and publicly condemn revenge attacks, disappearances and intimidation of activists. Previous attacks must be investigated.
- The international community must also in the immediate term provide support for those HRDs who have fled Afghanistan, are struggling to establish themselves in their new countries and who in many cases have lost their livelihoods. These activists, with their extensive knowledge and experience, represent a valuable resource built in the course of 20 years that must not be lost.
- Support for civil society and creating the space to operate – both in Afghanistan and in exile - should be a key policy and resource priority.

State of Human Rights Defenders in Afghanistan 2021

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Organisational Background: What is SRMO and what do we do

The Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization (SRMO) is an Afghan-led NGO. It was established in May 2013 to provide protection to grassroots Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) at risk in Afghanistan.

SRMO's main objective is to develop and provide local protection solutions to HRDs in Afghanistan and to empower HRDs so they can safely continue their crucial work. Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 SRMO has continued to provide support both to HRDs inside the country and to those who have fled and are now living in exile. The organization is in the process of recalibrating its operations to ensure that it can continue its mission, despite the immense challenges presented by recent developments.

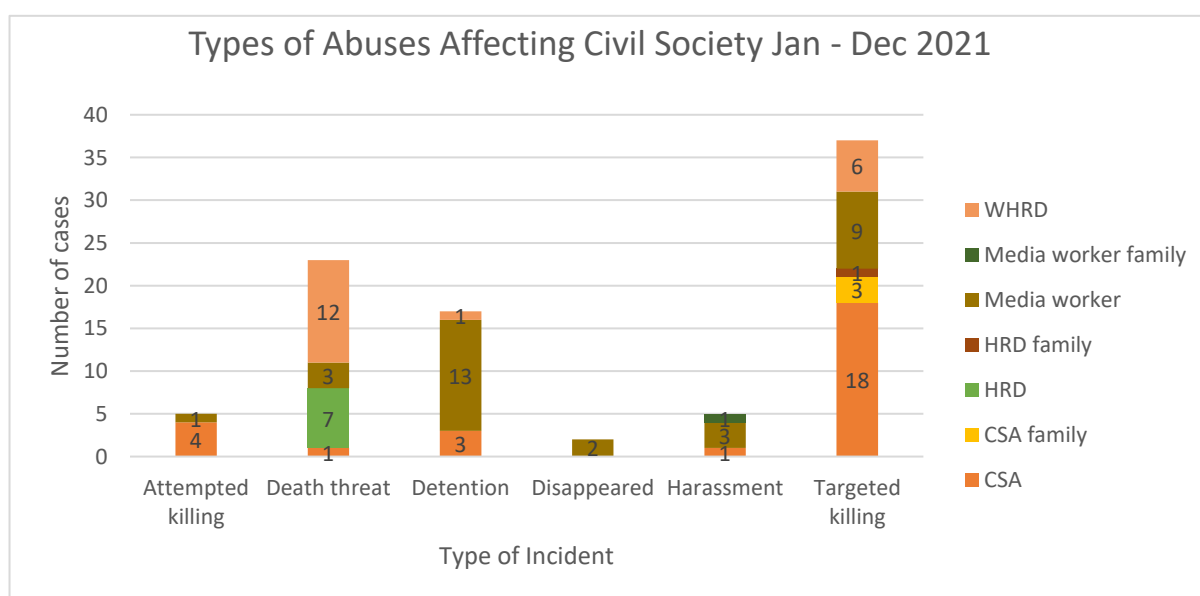
SRMO was established to respond to the growing threats and attacks against HRDs and Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) in Afghanistan and the lack of an effective mechanism to provide them with protection. SRMO provides capacity building (including safety and risk mitigation training, first aid training and stress management), facilitates and provides emergency grants, legal aid, emergency relocation, emergency housing, safety and risk mitigation advisory, site security surveys for accommodations and offices of HRDs and WHRDs, and training for unarmed security guards and for drivers supporting HRDs. SRMO has particularly focused its assistance on local and grassroots' HRDs and WHRDs, recognizing their utmost vulnerability as being at the frontline of defending human rights. SRMO focuses its resources on helping HRDs and WHRDs operating in insecure and rural areas where activists have very limited or no links and contacts with international organizations or diplomatic and UN missions for protection.

SRMO's safety and risk mitigation services for HRDs:

- ✓ SRMO established an Early Warning System and Rapid Response mechanisms in 2016 thanks to financial assistance from the Norwegian Human Rights Fund (NHRF). Since then hundreds of HRDs, WHRDs, CSOs and media workers have benefited from our services. Through the service, SRMO provides regular and vital security information and mitigation advice to hundreds of HRDs and WHRDs in the provinces across Afghanistan. Also, as a result of this mechanism, SRMO provided emergency assistance including emergency relocation and medical assistance for HRDs at risk.
- ✓ The total number of HRDs assisted between 2015 and 2021 has reached more than 1500. The majority of these were helped in 2021 due to increased insecurity amid the Taliban takeover of multiple provinces before the eventual collapse of Kabul. It was possible to offer this level of support due to SRMO's increased capacity and donor interest to support the protection of HRDs, WHRDs and CSOs. In addition, more than 100 other HRDs were helped and supported by the Human Rights Defenders Protection Committee, an umbrella of Afghan organizations that are active in the area of protection of HRDs, WHRDs and CSOs.
- ✓ SRMO has provided regular trainings on Hostile Environment, Security, Digital and Cyber security, First aid and other topics for HRDs, WHRDs, CSOs and media workers across Afghanistan.

Introduction

This annual report provides a summary of the situation for Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) in Afghanistan in 2021. Over the course of the year, a total of 37 activists, media workers and their family members were killed in targeted attacks. A further 5 were targeted in failed assassination attempts. Of those targeted, 13 were women and 29 were men. Those killed included 18 civil society activists, three family members of civil society activists, 6 women human rights defenders, the son of a human rights defender, and nine media workers.

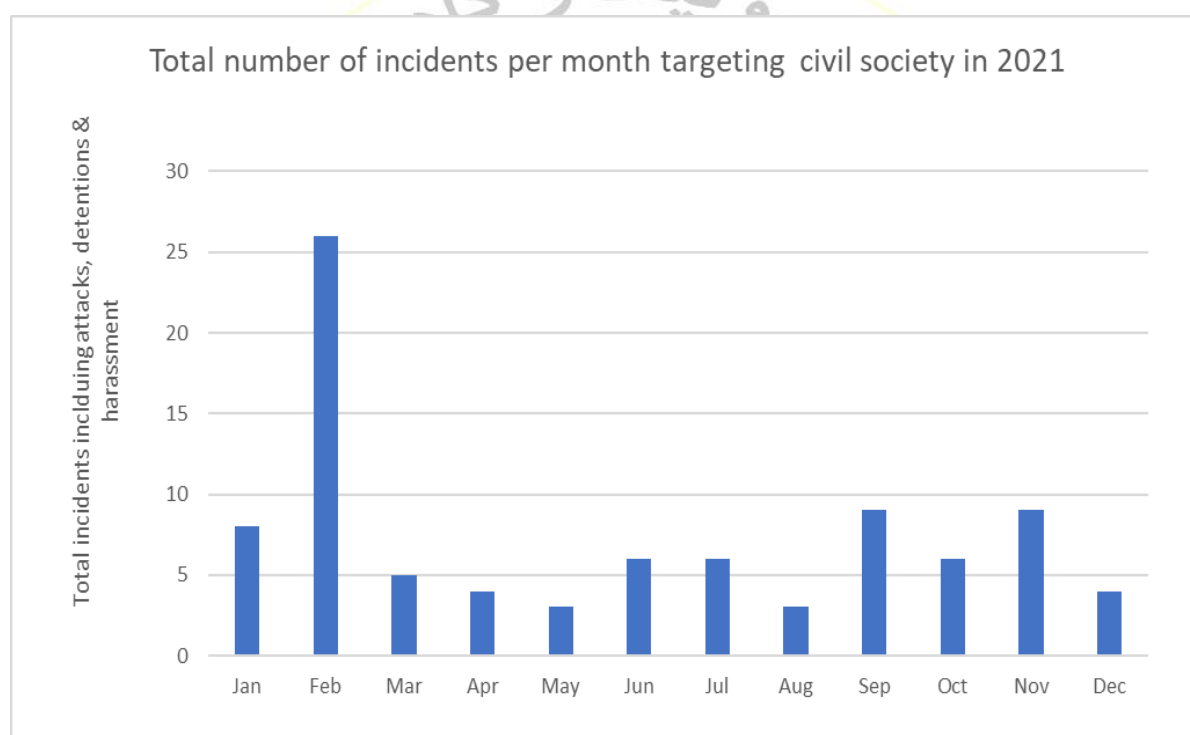


2021 will forever be marked in history as that in which the Taliban retook power after 20 years of engaging in prolonged bloody armed conflict. While the writing was on the wall as soon as the US signed a deal in February 2020 with their former adversaries that completely excluded the Afghan government and the people of Afghanistan, the Taliban gained almost complete control of the country with bewildering speed. After 20 years of human rights advancement, many Afghans found their fundamental rights and freedoms disappear overnight as the Taliban de-facto authorities moved to re-instate their strict interpretation of Sharia governance. As a result, for many – particularly but not only women – their careers, livelihoods, educational trajectories, freedom of movement, freedom of expression, rights to peaceful assembly and association came to a complete halt. The Taliban have completely closed any space for dissent. They have launched a campaign to persecute and silence critical voices, particularly women, who have continued to publicly voice concerns and protest against their rights being taken away by the new regime.

The Taliban takeover spread fear among the HRD community and left HRDs in a perilous position. HRDs feared they would be arrested or worse by the new rulers, whose first stint in government and as an insurgent group was notoriously marked by egregious human rights abuses and the almost total exclusion of women from public life. Activists and journalists who had spoken out against Taliban abuses and championed the human rights agenda felt abandoned as their international backers almost completely withdrew during the international community's chaotic departure from the country. SRMO estimates that several hundred HRDs and WHRDs have managed to leave Afghanistan since August 2021, with the assistance of international partners, but many others – particularly women and those operating in rural areas - lacked the international connections to get on evacuation lists, were unable to travel to Kabul to join the airlift, were unable to access the

airport, or were unable to leave family members behind. Others decided to stay to try to continue their human rights work inside the country but now face an extremely hostile operating environment marred by intimidation, killings, arbitrary detention and the disappearance of outspoken male and female activists and journalists.

This report is divided into two sections: the period from January 2021 until August 2021, and the last quarter of 2021 once the Taliban seized power and established a de-facto government. While there is an obvious need to focus on the situation post-August 2021, SRMO sees as part of its mandate ensuring that crimes committed against HRDs by different actors in the earlier part of the year are not forgotten in the chaos of the Taliban takeover. All violations against HRDs must be kept on the record, investigated and prosecuted. As the *de facto* government of Afghanistan, the Taliban now have a responsibility to investigate these abuses, especially those that have been committed either by the group's members or other actors since August 2021; the Taliban must ensure that no further abuses occur so that HRDs are free to continue their legitimate human rights work.

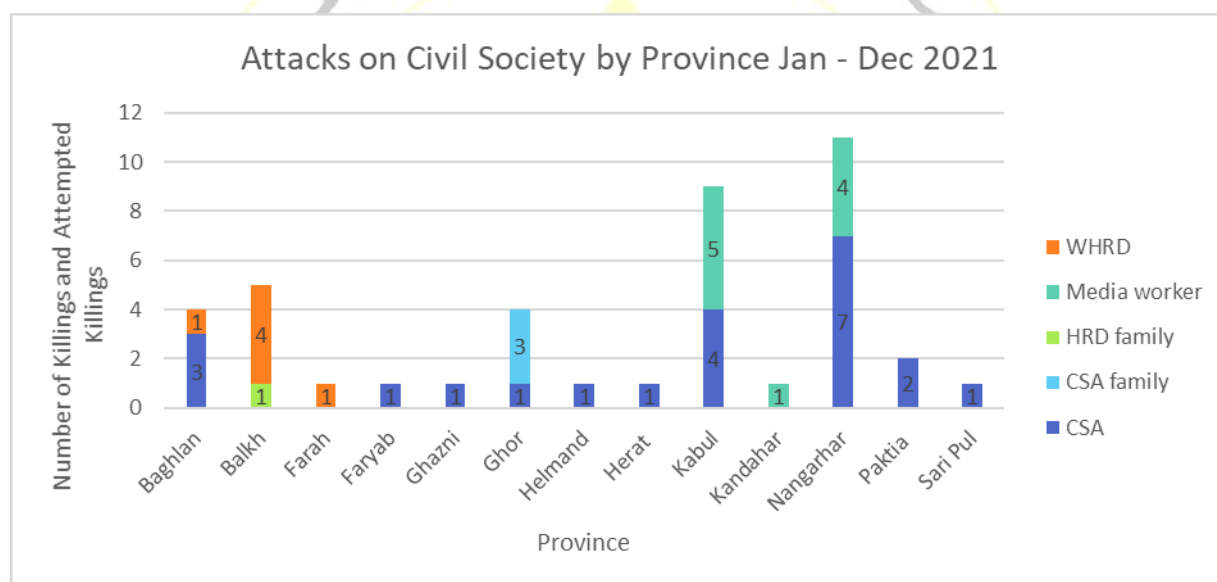


While SRMO's core focus is on HRDs, Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs), and Civil Society Activists (CSAs), we also hear through our networks of multiple attacks on other parts of civil society and civilians in general such as media workers, legal professionals, university lecturers, religious scholars and others. We have included data on attacks on these other affected groups in this report because they are illustrative of the broader human rights environment in the country and because many of these incidents are not being reported elsewhere. These cases illustrate the dramatic shrinking of the civic space in the lead up to and since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, and the danger that HRDs, CSOs and others face when they try to exercise their fundamental rights of freedom of assembly and freedom of expression. These rights were guaranteed by the Afghan constitution, which has been suspended by the Taliban de-facto government. Moreover, the fact that many journalists have fled, gone into hiding and/or are self-censoring means that much less news reporting is available than was the case prior to the Taliban takeover, making it useful to share these cases here.

Methodology

This report is based on detailed research and systematic documentation by SRMO of abuses and attacks against human rights defenders (HRDs), women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and civil society activists (CSAs) in Afghanistan between January and December 2021. Because of the exceptional circumstances during this period, this SRMO annual report also includes some data and commentary on other groups of civilians (such as legal professionals and journalists) that have been targeted in the lead up to and since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021.

Through this period, SRMO has been monitoring the security situation for HRDs and CSAs and directly assisted many HRDs at imminent risk. SRMO has been in contact with hundreds of CSAs and HRDs through its Early Warning System and Hostile Environment Trainings across Afghanistan, which allowed SRMO to systematically monitor and record the main trends and specific cases affecting civil society. Sources of information include HRDs themselves, their family members, the wider HRD community, media and other CSO organisations. The attribution of responsibility to the relevant actors is based on victim's testimonies; in addition, SRMO had access to several written threat letters allegedly sent and stamped by the Taliban.



The 37 killings and dozens of other incidents discussed in this report represent only a selection of the true number of cases. Based on its systematic monitoring of the situation on the ground and regular communication with HRDs/WHRDs, SRMO believes that the actual number of attacks and threats against HRDs, WHRDs, CSAs and other at-risk groups is much higher. SRMO observed that there is a low self-care awareness and reporting by HRDs and CSAs of threatening incidents, especially among WHRDs and civil society in the provinces.

However, the data recorded by SRMO provides an indication of the patterns of abuse that HRDs, WHRDs and CSAs face on a daily basis due to their human rights work, and presents an indication of the gravity of the harm civil society experienced in 2021.

Data-gathering after August 2021

Data gathering has become more challenging since the Taliban takeover because many HRDs and CSOs are in hiding or have fled – either to a different province or outside the country. However, SRMO continues to be in contact with much of its wide network inside the country and in exile and

continues to maintain a database of incidents. In addition to these networks we monitor local and international print and broadcast media, and track incidents on social media. Although confirming alleged incidents is now more challenging because of the huge drop in independent media coverage and because of growing restrictions on freedom of expression, our extensive experience inside Afghanistan and broad networks allow us to continue to conduct our verification process before a case is included in our database.

Who are Human Rights Defenders?

When assessing and documenting cases for this report, SRMO has used the definition of HRDs, provided by the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.¹

According to the UN definition the term of “human rights defender” is used to describe people who, individually or with others, act to promote or protect human rights in a peaceful manner. Human rights defenders seek the promotion and protection of civil and political rights as well as the promotion, protection and realization of economic, social and cultural rights. Human rights defenders can be anyone, and HRDs are defined above all by what they do, based on assessment of their actions and of some of the contexts in which they work. Common to most defenders are a commitment to helping others, a commitment to international human rights standards, a belief in equality and in non-discrimination, determination and, in many instances, tremendous courage.²

Political and security context

Pre-Taliban takeover of Kabul (Jan 2021 to mid-August 2021)

As discussed in last year’s annual report, attacks on HRDs, CSOs, journalists and other activists escalated dramatically from September 2020 onwards. Alarm at the pace of killings resulted in the establishment of a Joint Commission for the Protection of human Rights Defenders in December 2020, but in early 2021 the situation continued to deteriorate and the government appeared increasingly powerless to offer any credible protection. At a time when negotiations between the US and the Taliban were taking place, SRMO documented an escalation in attacks as Taliban and pro-government factions jockeyed for influence and tried to eliminate or silence those who spoke out against them, provided Afghans with alternative views about how to organize society and/or drew attention to abuses.

During the first half of 2021, some high profile attacks on civil society and HRDs were covered by the international media but many others went under the radar. The targeted killings of young female media workers and legal professionals rightly drew international condemnation³, but at the same time dozens of provincial HRDs, university staff, civil society activists, religious scholars and legal workers were facing intimidation, harassment and worse; dozens were killed and many others were forced to self-censor, stop work entirely or flee their home provinces. The elimination of these voices at the provincial and district level made it easier for the Taliban to control the political narrative and avoid being held to account for its actions.

¹ Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (commonly known as the “Declaration on human rights defenders”).

² See: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/SRHRDefenders/Pages/Defender.aspx>

³ <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/afghanistan-three-female-media-workers-slain-in-separate-brutal-attacks.html>; <https://www.voanews.com/a/south-central-asia-gunmen-assassinate-2-female-afghan-judges-kabul/6200838.html>

At the beginning of this period, the Taliban was already effectively in charge of swathes territory in the group's traditional strongholds in the south, albeit with the exception of provincial capitals. Their territorial expansion sped up notably from May 2021, and by mid-July the US estimated they were in control of approximately half the country's districts.⁴ Less than a month later, their takeover was



almost complete with a final rapid push into the capital in August 2021.

While many of the attacks detailed below were blamed on the Taliban, none have been systematically investigated or prosecuted. Others have been claimed by Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP).

Photo 1: Two young media workers were killed in Kabul in June 2021

Political and Security Context: After Taliban takeover of Kabul (mid-August 2021 to December 2021)

During the various rounds of negotiations in Qatar and other locations, Taliban negotiators claimed the group had changed, would govern in a more peaceful and inclusive manner, and was more open to concepts of women's rights and women's education, however bound by the Sharia principles.⁵ Taliban spokesmen repeated⁶ these pledges after the group captured Kabul, but reality soon diverged from this rhetoric (see comparison table in Annex 1). On 17 August 2021, as soon as the group took control, the group announced a 'general amnesty', stating that no one would be punished for their activities under the previous government.⁷ This was immediately contradicted by multiple reports of revenge killings and displacements of civilian populations, mostly of non-Pashtun ethnic groups. Regular reports of revenge killings, including activists and HRDs, have continued across the country (see below). In addition, the Taliban released almost the entire prison population during their takeover, adding to the hostile environment for HRDs, prosecutors and judges, who were instrumental in the prosecution of these former inmates.

Soon after the Taliban takeover, various Taliban spokesmen told women to stay at home⁸, announced that girls age 12 and above could no longer go to school, placed restrictions on what journalists are permitted to report, and banned demonstrations. Many women have lost their jobs, including the vast majority of female civil servants.⁹ The group closed the Ministry of Women Affairs

⁴ [Timeline: Taliban's rapid advance across Afghanistan | Taliban News | Al Jazeera](#)

⁵ See for example <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/opinion/taliban-afghanistan-war-haqgani.html>

⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/transcript-of-talibans-first-press-conference-in-kabul>

⁷ <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20210817-taliban-declare-amnesty-urge-women-to-join-government-according-to-shariah-law>

⁸ <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/25/asia/taliban-women-workplaces-afghanistan-intl/index.html>

⁹ <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/19/1038685721/female-workers-kabul-stay-home-taliban-rule>

and resurrected its feared Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, the so-called morality police. Spokesmen talk about certain restrictive rules being temporary but this was also the case during their first period in power from 1996 to 2001, when the Taliban claimed many restrictions were necessary ‘temporarily’ until the security environment improved¹⁰.

A key theme in the early stages (that remains ongoing) was of an apparent disconnect between statements made by the movement’s spokesmen/negotiators and the behaviour of the group on the ground.¹¹ The increased freedoms the Taliban negotiators claimed they would allow – if they were ever even partially genuine – quickly disappeared as the Taliban formed their de-facto authority that completely excluded women, other political factions and lacked ethnic representation.

HRDs

Against this backdrop the situation for HRDs and CSAs is dire. As an insurgent group, the Taliban have often justified attacks against HRDs and CSAs, accusing them of promoting pro-Western and anti-Islamic values. As detailed below, since the Taliban takeover of the country, there have been killings, arrests and disappearances of HRDs, WHRDs and other members of civil society. HRDs are unable to work in the open and many have lost their livelihoods with the freeze in international aid, making them effectively destitute. The once strong movement of women’s groups which was built over the past 20 years, and was the main catalyst for advancing of human rights and women’s rights protection in Afghanistan, has been dismantled. Many WHRDs and female CSAs have had to leave the country due to fear of reprisals, while others are in hiding; many women (and male activists) had to burn certificates and other documents that would expose their involvement in rights activism.

While the situation for HRDs and CSOs was still difficult prior to the Taliban takeover, members of civil society previously worked within a legal framework that at least on paper guaranteed freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and a broad range of protections (albeit imperfect and often lacking implementation). The various protection mechanisms that civil society had painstakingly lobbied for, the legal system and the constitution that underpinned it are now in effect suspended, and the Taliban is once again ruling according to its own strict interpretation of Islamic Sharia law. Despite the fact that Taliban negotiators paid lip service to human rights and women’s rights during negotiations, Taliban officials inside Afghanistan have made it clear through their actions that they reject many fundamental human rights and that people who transgress the group’s new red lines will be punished. HRDs are not only experiencing the collapse of the state framework and legal protection mechanisms within which they operated, but are also at direct threat of retaliatory actions for their work over the past two decades. Members of civil society and the legal profession face threats not just from the Taliban de facto authorities, but also from hundreds of extremists who the Taliban released from detention centers.

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/03/afghanistan-women-defiant-amid-taliban-crackdown>

¹¹ Thomas Ruttig argues in his March 2021 paper ‘Have the Taliban changed’ that the group’s structure of ‘horizontal autonomy means that any changes in approach over policy by the top Taliban leadership may not be translated fully or at all into a change in approach ‘on the ground.’ See <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CTC-SENTINEL-032021.pdf>

The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) has been unable to continue its activities since the Taliban takeover. The AIHRC Chairwoman Shaharзад Akbar was forced to leave Afghanistan during the evacuation because of fears for her safety. On 18 September 2021, AIHRC issued a statement saying that it was unable to carry out its duties¹², that its offices had been occupied by the Taliban, and that its vehicles and other resources were being used by the group. In a statement to the European Parliament’s Subcommittee on Human Rights and Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality on 6 September 2021, Ms Akbar expressed her concern for her former colleagues who had been unable to leave Afghanistan and who were in hiding in fear of retaliation for their work highlighting human rights abuses.¹³

Anti-Taliban protests and shrinking civic space

A key indicator of the shrinking of civic space since mid-August 2021 was the Taliban’s reaction to peaceful protests. Despite repeated claims that the new authorities would be inclusive and open to criticism and feedback, the Taliban soon clamped down on demonstrations that sprung up in numerous provincial capitals after their takeover. Peaceful protests – mostly led by women’s groups - were dispersed violently, with live bullets, whips, beatings and pepper spray. The Taliban banned unauthorized gatherings on 8 September. Protesters (and journalists covering rallies) have been detained and beaten by Taliban security personnel after peacefully demanding basic rights, such as access to education and employment. In one typical example, Taliban soldiers on 4 September dispersed a women’s march in the capital Kabul using pepper spray and hitting female participants with rifle butts. On 18 August, two protesters were killed and others injured when Taliban soldiers fired live bullets into a crowd in Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar province.



Photo 1: Civil Society Activist Abdul Rahman Maven was shot dead in Jalalabad in October 2021 by unidentified gunmen

The Taliban has still not made it clear whether civil society and non-governmental organisations will be allowed to function, and if so, under what kind of framework. In the meantime some civil society groups and NGOs are managing to continue some aspects of their work, albeit in an extremely cautious and low key manner. Most organisations that have been allowed to operate are those focused on humanitarian operations. It is highly unlikely that HRDs will be permitted to continue their work openly. While the comments of certain Taliban spokesmen

suggest the group aims to pursue a less oppressive style of government, the group’s core beliefs – that the broader human rights framework and non-religious law is un-Islamic and un-Afghan – likely remain unchanged.

¹² https://www.aihrc.org.af/home/press_release/91138

¹³ https://www.aihrc.org.af/home/daily_report/91135#

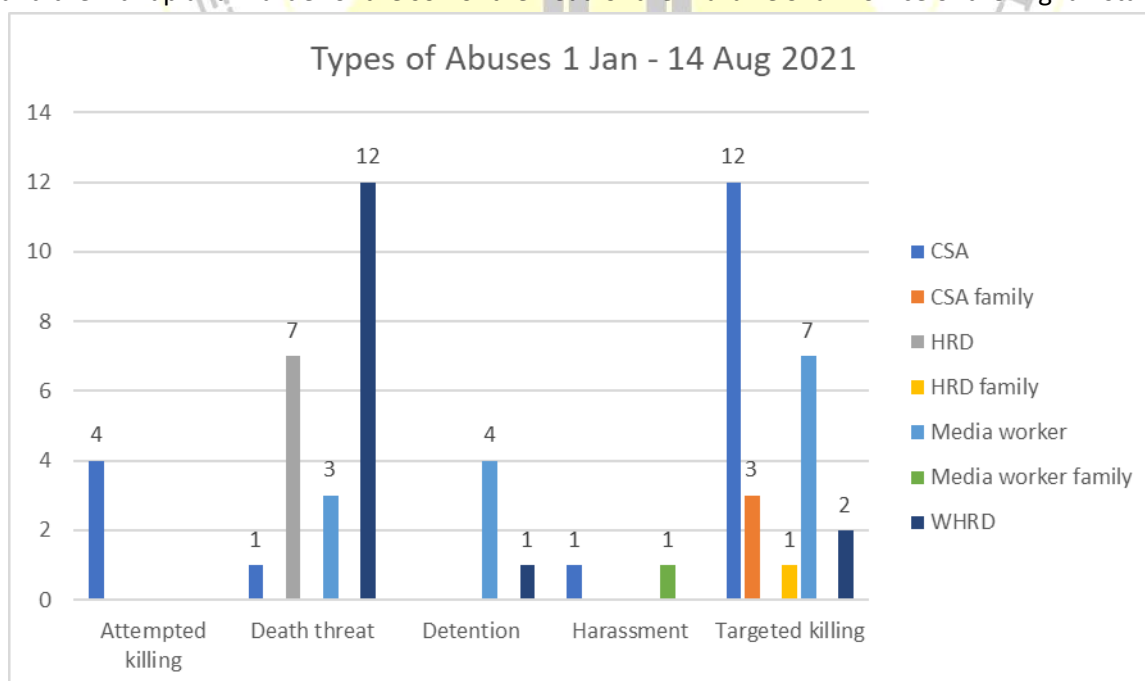
Many NGO offices, both local and international, have been raided since the Taliban takeover. The Taliban has conducted searches, enquired about resources, vehicles and the names of senior personnel. In addition to the banking crisis affecting the entire country, the Taliban has frozen the bank accounts of some local NGOs. Several shelters set up to provide refuge for activists who fear retaliatory actions by the Taliban have also been raided, adding to the sense of insecurity and fear.

The situation for journalists and media workers is precarious. Despite the Taliban's claims in the early days of their takeover that the media would remain free, numerous journalists were detained in the early weeks of Taliban rule, mostly while covering women-led anti-Taliban demonstrations.¹⁴ Several were brutally beaten while in detention. The Taliban's newly established Government Media and Information Center (GMIC) subsequently in September 2021 issued a list of 11 rules for media outlets that suggested conditions for journalists were in fact far from free. The new regulations forbid publishing news that could be considered to go against Islam or 'national figures'.¹⁵ They also call on media outlets to 'coordinate with' GMIC when preparing detailed reports and be careful about covering any news that has not been confirmed by officials.¹⁶

SRMO's 2021 Findings January to mid-August

Attacks on HRDs, CSAs and media workers

The wave of targeted killings of civil society activists and human rights defenders¹⁷ that escalated in late 2020¹⁸ continued at an alarming pace in the first 8 months of 2021. The cases recorded by SRMO are a snapshot of the different types of violations HRDs and CSAs faced in Afghanistan and do not represent a complete record; there are almost certainly more incidents that went unreported. Between January and mid-August, SRMO documented 21 cases of violence against HRDs, CSAs and their family members. These cases include the targeted killings of two WHRDs (in Baghlan and Farah) and the kidnap and murder of the son of the head of the Mazar-e Sharif office of the Afghanistan



¹⁴ [Afghanistan: Media workers detained while covering Kabul protests - IFJ](#)

¹⁵ [Afghanistan : "11 journalism rules" imposed by Taliban open way to censorship and arbitrary decisions , RSF warns | RSF](#)

¹⁶ [Afghanistan : "11 journalism rules" imposed by Taliban open way to censorship and arbitrary decisions , RSF warns | RSF](#)

¹⁷ There is of course overlap between civil society activists and human rights defenders. We categorize them in our database depending on the main focus of their work.

¹⁸ www.srmo.org

Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC). Eleven CSAs were killed, along with three family members. A further three CSAs were seriously injured in attempted killings, while two more CSAs escaped injury after failed assassination attempts. In addition, 10 media workers died in targeted killings in the first 7.5 months of the year, while several more were killed in crossfire in conflict zones.

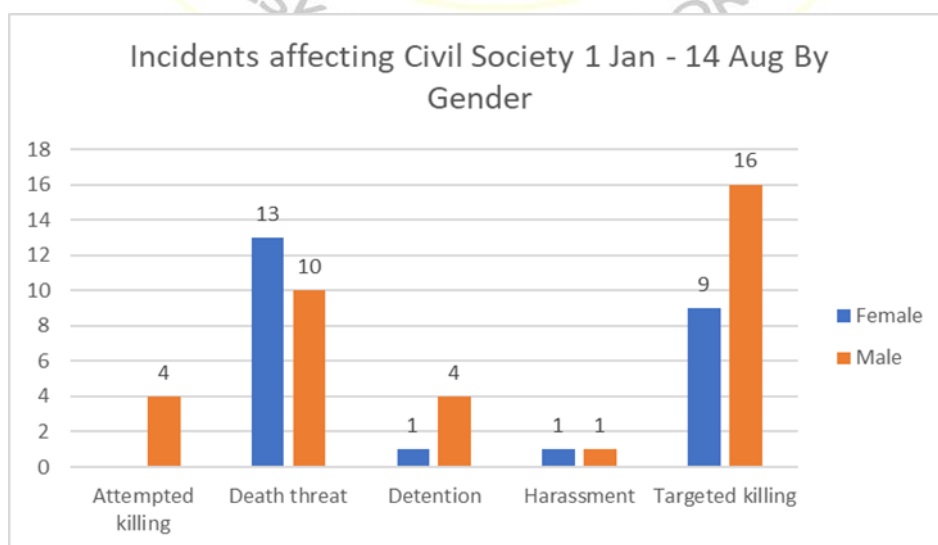
The vast majority of targeted killings involved shootings, with smaller numbers of cases involving improvised explosive devices (IEDs); at least four targeted killings in Kabul involved the use of magnetic IEDs or ‘sticky bombs’ attached to the victims’ cars. This type of attack often causes additional casualties including drivers, other passengers, and bystanders.

Threats

In February, 6 HRDs, 10 WHRDs, 3 media workers and 1 civil society activist were forced to relocate outside Afghanistan because of credible threats to life. These relocations took place shortly after lists of activists’ names and personal details were published on social media; while the exact origin of the lists remains unclear they were widely believed to be Taliban ‘hit-lists’; several activists named on the lists also received written threat letters stamped by the Taliban. Another group threat of this nature circulated in Herat in western Afghanistan in May. The National Directorate of Security (NDS) gained access to a list of 28 rights activists and journalists that were reportedly being targeted by the Taliban. In addition to these group threats, SRMO recorded three individual cases of activists receiving direct death threats (in Nangarhar, Kapisa and Kabul) that resulted in them having to go into hiding and/or relocate. Prior to the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August, additional Taliban hit lists were published on social media platforms; these named people from all walks of life including HRDs, WHRDs, journalists, civil servants, judges, and lawyers among others.

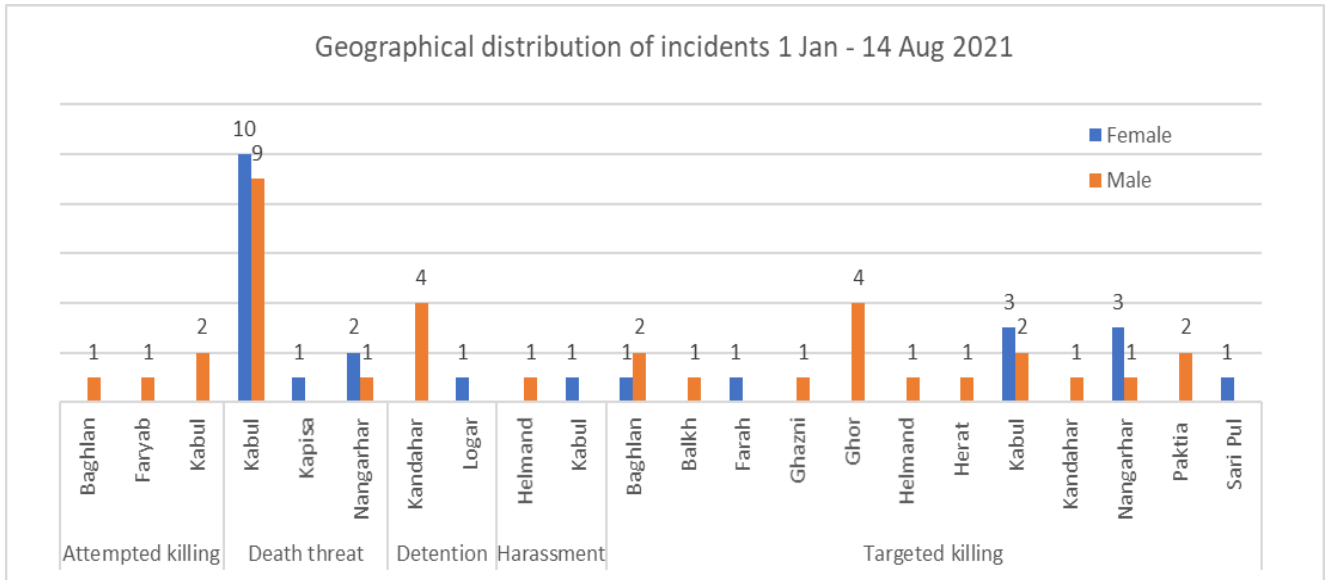
Gender

SRMO’s findings show that in the first eight and a half months of the year, both men and women were targeted by harassment, death threats and assassinations. SRMO recorded more death threats targeting women activists than men, though more men were actually killed in targeted attacks. The number of death threats against women likely reflects the way in which women have in recent years been extremely active and vocal raising human rights concerns and campaigning for the inclusion of ordinary Afghans in negotiations over the future of Afghanistan. In February 2021 at least 10 WHRDs and a female media worker had to be relocated after receiving death threats from the Taliban because of their activism.



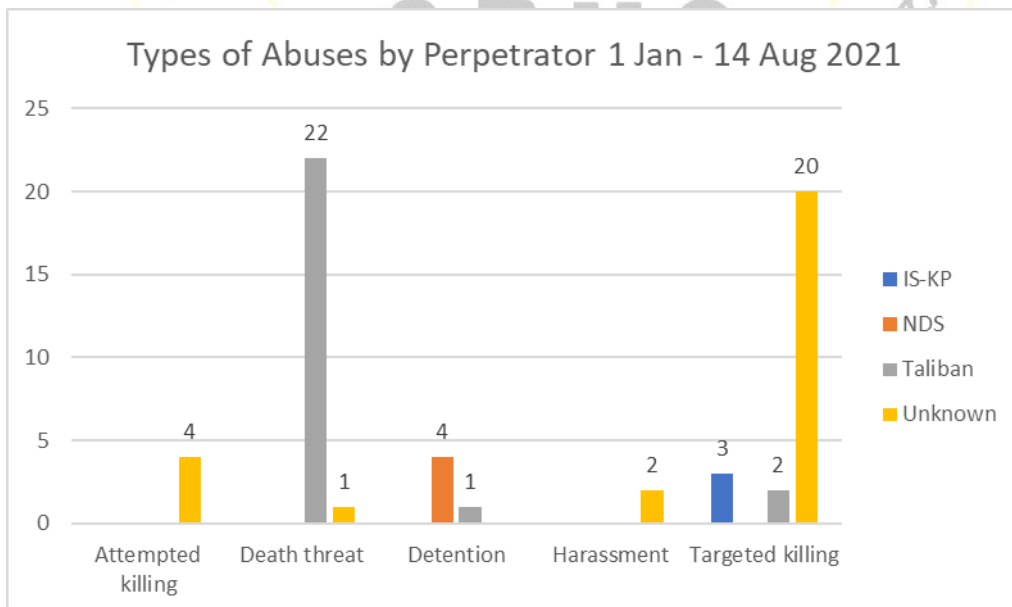
Geographical spread of incidents

Violence against activists took place countrywide, but Kabul and Nangarhar saw the largest numbers of incidents. Kabul was until August seen as relatively safe because of its relatively more liberal atmosphere and presence of large numbers of civil society activists; however, the number of incidents highlights that violent extremist groups were clearly able to operate in the capital. The significant number of violent incidents in Nangarhar likely reflects the strong presence of both Taliban and IS-KP in the eastern region.



Perpetrators Jan to 14 August 2021

The former government was so weak by the beginning of 2021 that it was unable to properly investigate the wave of attacks targeting civil society. As a result, the circumstances of the attacks on human rights defenders and civil society activists remain opaque and there was little clarity over who the perpetrators were.



In the period from January to August, the majority of attacks on activists went unclaimed. This continued a pattern from 2020 where the Taliban no longer openly claimed responsibility for attacks on civil society, likely because they were involved in negotiations and wanted to be able to claim plausible deniability. However, the Taliban were very likely responsible for many of these incidents; the group continued to issue threats civil society activists (see above), were able to operate countrywide despite ongoing military operations against them, and had a clear motivation to drown out independent voices that were critical of Taliban human rights abuses.

In addition to fighting with the Taliban and conducting mass casualty bombings, ISIS-KP has also carried out attacks on civil society; the group claimed responsibility for the murder of three young media workers who were killed in Jalalabad in March 2021, and was likely responsible for other assassinations.

Attacks on Human Rights Defenders and Civil Society Activists

- 13 January, Mazar-e Sharif, Balkh Province. Unknown armed men kidnapped the eldest son of Mr Sayed Mohammad Samai, head of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission's (AIHRC) regional office in Mazar City. The kidnappers later killed Mr Samai's son.
- 1 January, Feroz Koh District, Ghor Province. A well-known Civil Society Activist and Manager of a radio station in Ghor province, Mr Besmillah Adel Aymaq was shot and killed by unknown gunmen in Feroz Koh City. The perpetrator managed to escape and no arrest was made. According to reports, Mr Aymaq had received death threats and had already survived a previous attempt on his life after which no investigation took place.
- 8 January 2021, Kabul City, Kabul Province. An improvised explosive device was planted near the main gate of civil society activist Mr Fardin Fanahee's residence. It was found and defused by the police before it detonated. Mr Fanahee is Director of the Afghanistan Youth Civil Society Association; his name was on a so-called Taliban 'kill list' issued on social media shortly before the attack.
- 21 January, Gadiz City, Paktia Province. Unknown armed men opened fire on a CSO member Mr Adel Nang while he was traveling in the city. As a result, both Mr Adel Nang and his driver were killed. The attackers managed to escape the area and no one took responsibility for the attack.
- 27 January, Ghazni City, Ghazni Province. Unknown armed men shot and killed a civil society activist and tribal leader Mr Abdul Razaq Andar in front of his home. The perpetrators managed to escape and no-one claimed responsibility of the attack.
- 27 January, Kabul City, Kabul Province. A civil society activist was attacked in the Kotel Khair Khana area of District 17. Unknown armed men opened fire on the activist's vehicle while he was on the way home from his office. The CSA escaped injury but his vehicle was damaged.
- 23 February, Baghlan Markazi, Baghlan Province. Members of the Taliban reportedly shot and killed Dr. Khalil-ul-Rahman Narmgo, a civil society activist, while he was driving his car on the highway between Baghlan Markazi and Puli Khumri. Armed men stopped his car on the highway and opened fire.
- 25 February, Feroz Koh, Ghor Province. Unknown armed men shot and killed three family members of Bimiullah Hadil Aymaq, a CSA and journalist who had been killed the previous month (see above).
- 21 March, Baghlan Markazi, Baghlan Province. Ms Nasrin Sitodah, an ex MP from Herat Province and a women's rights activist was killed in a mine explosion in Darwazeha village.
- 13 April, Puli Khumri District, Baghlan province. Civil society activist Mr Yusuf Ikhpulwak was kidnaped in the Khawja Alwan area along with his cousin. They were both beheaded and left on the side of the road. Mr Yusuf was also a political activist in his area. The exact reason behind the killing remains unknown.
- 17 April Civil, Sari Pul District, Sari Pul Province. Ms Nooria Noran, a civil rights activist, was killed in her home by unknown armed men. Her brother and sister in law were seriously wounded.
- 29 April, Torghondi District, Herat Province. Abdul Saboor Karimi, a civil rights activist, was dragged out of his car, shot and killed by unknown armed men while he was travelling on the main road from Torghodi to Herat City. The reason behind the killing remains unknown.

- 7 May, Gardiz City, Paktia Province. Mr Samad Pakteen, a civil rights activist, was shot by unknown armed men in District 1 of Gardiz City; he later died of his injuries in hospital.
- 27 May, Farah City, Farah Province. Members of the Taliban reportedly kidnapped and killed Ms. Kubra Fayaz in Koshkib Village, Farah. She was a human rights defender and head of the Legal Unit at the Juvenile Correction Centre in Farah province.
- 12 June, Kabul City, Kabul Province. Mr Murtaza Sadat, a civil society activist, was killed in the Dashte Barchi area, Police District 13 of Kabul City. The victim was head of the Sadat Youth Council in Kabul; the car he was travelling in was targeted by a magnetic IED.
- 20 June, Greshk District, Helmand province. Well-known civil society activist and headmaster of a local school Mr. Khalil Ahmad Khairkhow was shot and killed by unknown armed men near his house.
- 6 July Kabul City, Kabul Province. Unknown armed men shot and killed Mohammad Ibrahim Rahimi, head of the civil society organization coordination body in Farah Province. The killing took place in the Fazel Beg area of Police District 5 in Kabul.
- 7 August, Khogyani District, Nangarhar Province. Civil Society Activist and member of Transitional Justice Mr Safiullah Safi was stabbed to death by unknown men in Khogyani district of Nangarhar province.

Other targeted groups

In addition to CSAs and HRDs, several other groups of professionals were subjected to a similar pattern of attacks. These included legal professionals, humanitarian workers, and religious scholars. Seven university staff were killed in targeted attacks (incidents took place in Parwan, Farah, and Kabul). In one attack, several students were also injured when a university shuttle bus was targeted with a magnetic IED or so-called sticky bomb. Additionally, at least 8 religious scholars were killed across the country; assassinations took place in Kabul (3), Takhar (1), Parwan (1) Injil, Herat (1), Puli Alam, Logar (1) and Sheberghan, Jawzjan (1). Seven legal professionals (including judges, prosecutors and lawyers) were assassinated in incidents in Kabul, Kandahar, Ghazni and Logar:

- 17 January, Kabul City, Kabul Province. Two female Supreme Court judges were shot dead on their way to work in the capital Kabul.
- 8 March, Kabul City, Kabul Province. Civil prosecutor Mr Mirwais was shot and killed in Kabul City. The incident took place in the Abrasani area of Police District 5.
- 7 June, Kandahar City, Kandahar Province. It was reported that the Taliban shot and killed a primary Court Judge Mr. Mawlana Fayaz in Kandahar city.
- 08 June, Mohamad Agha District, Logar Province. An investigative prosecutor, Mr Mohammad Zaman, was abducted and later shot and killed by unknown armed men.
- 27 July, Kabul City, Kabul Province. Unknown armed men shot and killed prosecutor Mohammad Gul, head of the Justice Department of Paktia Province. and his driver was wounded. The attack, in which his driver was also wounded, took place while he was travelling by car through the Silo area of Kabul.
- 11 August, Ghazni City, Ghazni Province. Unknown gunmen shot and killed Abdul Matin Atayee in an ambush. Mr Atayee was a senior judge and employee at the Ghazni Appellate Court.

The reporting period also saw attacks on humanitarian agencies. The International NGO Safety Office (INSO) recorded a total of 26 NGO personnel killed and 54 injured in Afghanistan in 2021, up from 14 killed and 39 injured in 2020, highlighting the deteriorating security environment.¹⁹ In one particularly disturbing incident on 8 June 2021 that seemed to be ethnically motivated, 10 deminers from the Hazara ethnic group working for the HALO trust in Baghlan province were separated from their colleagues and killed. In another attack on humanitarian workers the following week, two members of a polio vaccination team were killed in Nangarhar province.

¹⁹ <https://www.ngosafety.org/keydata-dashboard/>

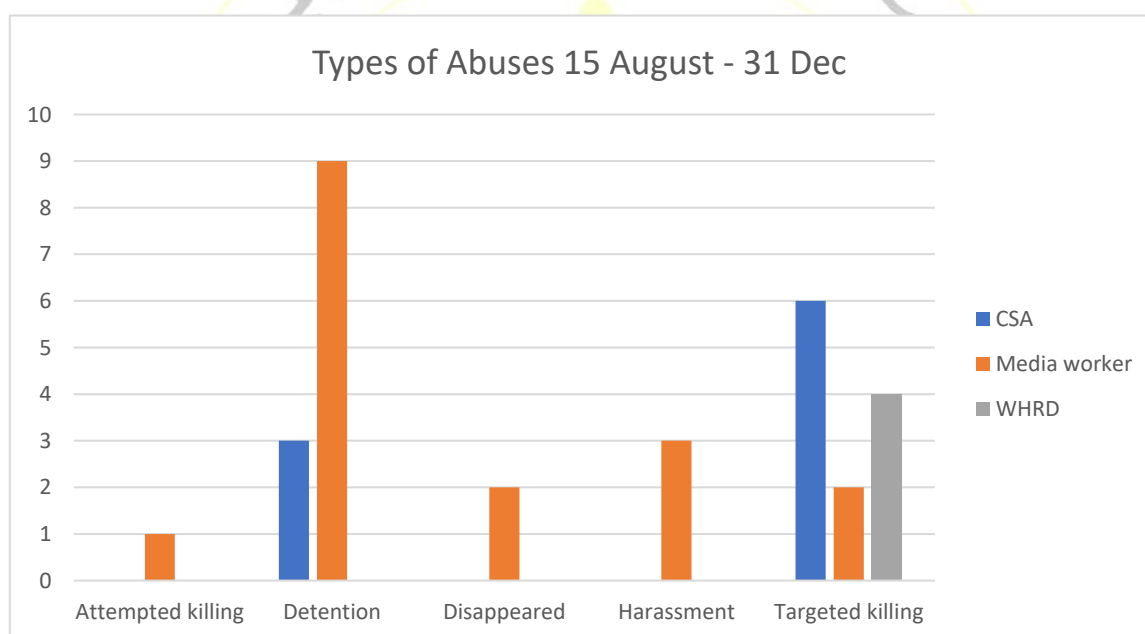
SRMO's 2021 Findings 15 August to December

Attacks on HRDs, CSAs and media workers

Since the Taliban takeover, SRMO has documented 12 targeted killings of HRDs, CSAs and journalists, with another media worker seriously injured in an attempted killing and many more injured in beatings. The killings included 6 civil society activists, 4 WHRDs and 2 media workers.

The targeted killings included the deaths of at least four WHRDs in Mazar-e Sharif in opaque circumstances. The women had reportedly been called with promises of a seat on an evacuation flight; they subsequently went missing and their bodies were found several days later. The group included women who had arranged and participated in demonstrations against the Taliban in Mazar-e Sharif in Balkh province; one of the victims was Frozan Safi, a 29 year old economics lecturer.

Four CSAs were killed in three separate incidents in Nangarhar, while at least two activists were killed by Taliban gunfire during a demonstration in Nangarhar's provincial capital Jalalabad in the early days of Taliban rule. Journalists have been killed in Kabul and Nangarhar, while another journalist was seriously injured in an attack in the former.



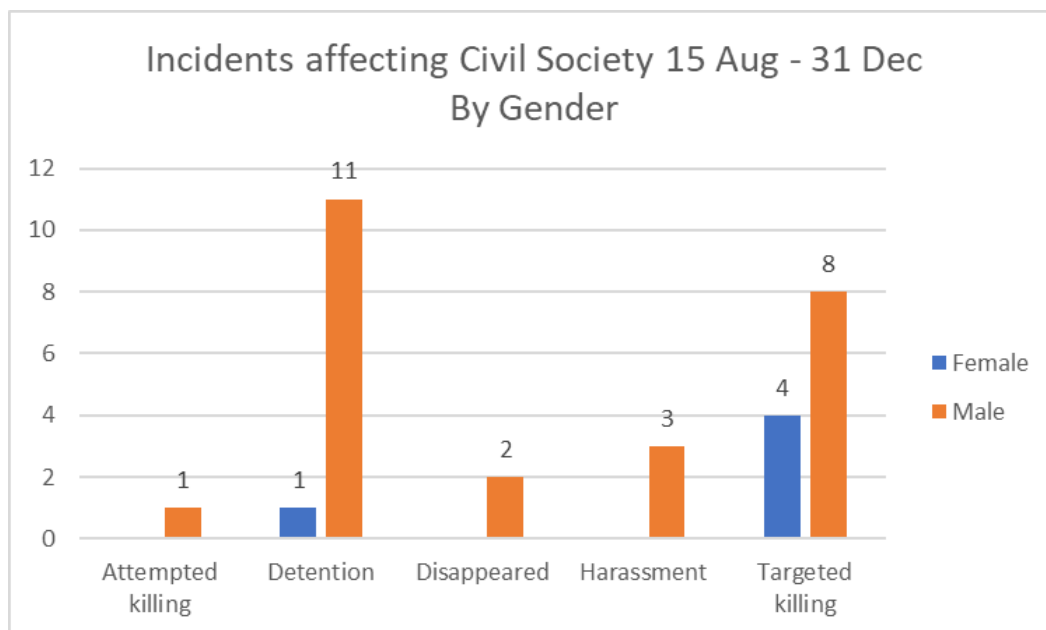
Threats

Many HRDs and CSAs with a public profile have received threatening phonecalls and report that the Taliban have visited their villages, homes and/or former workplaces looking for them. The exact circumstances of and motives of these searches remain unclear but the pattern of searches and threats had forced many activists to go into hiding, moving location regularly and attempting to find ways to seek asylum outside Afghanistan.

Gender

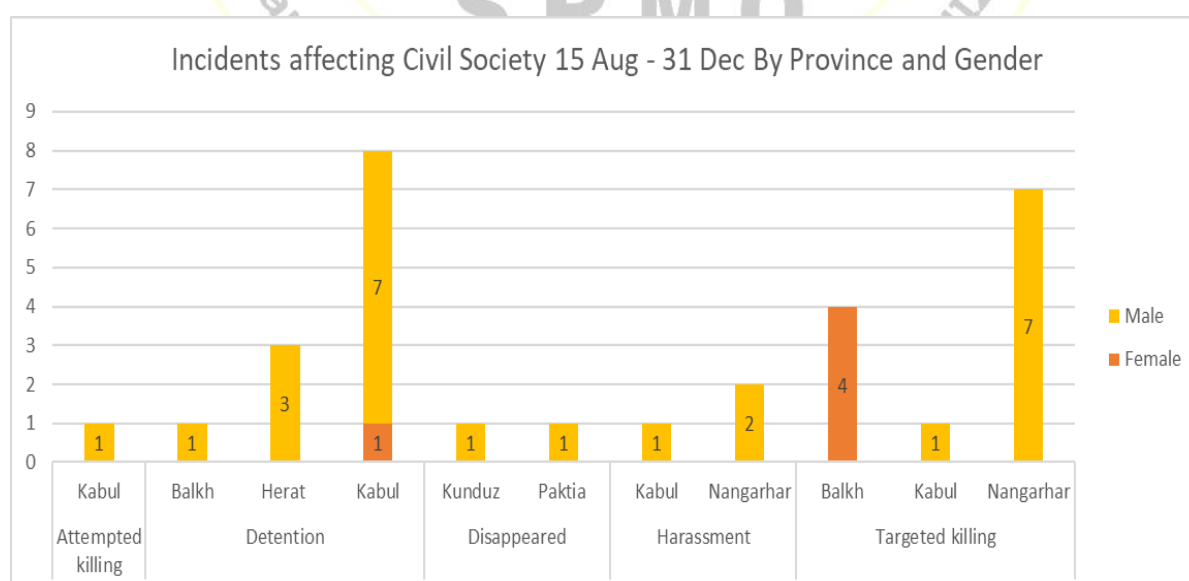
Of the 12 civil society figures assassinated between the Taliban takeover of Kabul and the end of the year, 8 were men and 4 were women. The majority of detentions, disappearances and cases of harassment against civil society between mid-August and 31 December 2021 affected men. However, women's groups have been at the forefront of holding demonstrations against Taliban rule. Separate to the individual cases logged in SRMO's database, there were multiple reports between mid-August and December 2021 of groups of women activists being harassed and beaten

during protests. In one typical example, Taliban soldiers on 4 September dispersed a women’s march in the capital Kabul using pepper spray and hitting female participants with rifle butts.



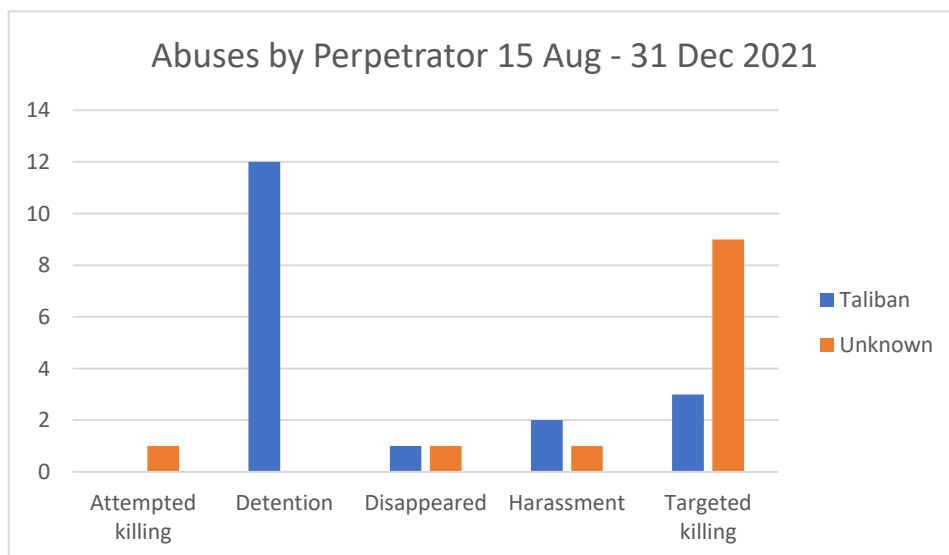
Geographical distribution of violence

The largest number of incidents affecting civil society between 15 August and 31 December 2021 took place in Kabul and Nangarhar provinces; this was a similar pattern to the January to mid-August period. Nangarhar – an area close to the Pakistani border that has long had a strong Taliban presence - saw the largest number of targeted killings with 7 in total, 6 of which took place in the provincial capital Jalalabad. Balkh, whose capital Mazar-e Sharif emerged as a staging post for evacuations after the end of the Kabul airlift in August, was the location of the killing of four WHRDs as discussed above. Kabul and the western city of Herat saw numerous detentions of civil society personnel.



Perpetrators 15 Aug – 31 Dec

Relatives of victims and local civil society networks accused the Taliban of being responsible for at least three targeted killings of civil society activists since 15 August. Nine other fatal attacks on activists or media workers were carried out by ‘unknown gunmen’; given the Taliban’s almost total territorial control it is likely the group’s foot soldiers were responsible for some if not all of these incidents. All 12 detentions of civil society and media workers recorded in SRMO’s database



between 15 August and 31 December 2021 were carried out by the Taliban (in addition to these cases of individuals being detained, the Taliban has regularly detained groups of journalists and protestors during anti-Taliban demonstrations).

Harassment

There are frequent and well documented reports of journalists being detained and beaten by Taliban security personnel while they are reporting, often while covering demonstrations. Sometimes journalists have been beaten as a means of dispersing them; on other occasions journalists have been beaten and tortured in Taliban custody after being detained. Media workers feature heavily in SRMO’s list of attacks, detentions, disappearances, and harassment since the Taliban takeover of Kabul. Their visibility puts them at great risk. Most of the cases of harassment included in SRMO’s database included not just threats but also beatings by Taliban personnel.

Legal professionals

As was the case earlier in the year, legal professionals continued to face violence and intimidation because of their work. Legal professionals now face a situation in which many of those they have previously prosecuted or imprisoned are now in positions of authority. Many other criminals were also set free from prisons during the Taliban takeover, representing an additional threat to legal workers. In the last quarter of the year, at least one judge was assassinated (in Kunar province, an area with a strong IS-KP presence) and SRMO recorded two cases of family members of legal workers being physically harmed after refusing to disclose the whereabouts of their relatives. In one case in December 2021, unknown gunmen beat the the brother, sister and son-in-law of a female defence lawyer when the family members refused to tell the attackers where she was; in another incident in the same month, the relative of a former justice ministry employee was reportedly beaten up by the Taliban.

Attacks on HRDs and CSAs

- 12 October, Jalalabad City, Nangarhar Province. Mr Abdul Rahman Maven, a civil society activist, was shot and killed by unknown armed men in the 4th District of Jalalabad city.
- 2 November, Mazar-e Sharif, Balkh Province. At least four female activists were reportedly found dead in Mazar-e Sharif City, Balkh Province; the female activists were killed in unclear circumstances but some reports indicate they had been tricked into meeting their killers by being promised a seat on an evacuation flight. The victims relatives claim that the activists received a call from an unknown source asking them to come to Mazar Airport in order to leave the country. The victims included Frozan Safi, a Women's Human Rights Defender who had been active organizing protests against the Taliban in Mazar-e Sharif.
- 02 November 2021, Bagرامي area, Jalalabad City, Nangarhar province, unknown armed men shot and killed a male activist Mr Hijratullah Khogyalnai and his brother while they were driving in their private car. The attackers managed to escape the area in a rickshaw.
- 23 December 2021, Momand Dara District, Nangarhar Province, civil society activist Mr Naik Amal Shinwari was abducted and killed by unknown men. According to the report, his body was found badly tortured in an abandoned area with his hands tied behind his back.

Arrests, intimidation and harassment

- 14 October 2022, Mazar City, Balkh Province, A civil society activist was detained by the Taliban and released the following day. The activist reported that he was beaten and questioned by the Taliban and his mobile phone was checked. He said his detention fitted a pattern of arrests and harassment of CSAs and HRDs and WHRDs in Mazar since the Taliban took the city.
- 15 October, Kabul City, Kabul Province, A civil society activist who was detained by the Taliban 18 days beforehand on charges of organizing demonstrations in Kabul was released.
- 02 November 2021, Kabul City, Kabul Province, The Taliban raided the home of a female activist and journalist during the night. The Taliban took the activist and her two brothers out of their home to an unknown location. They later released the activist and one of her brothers, but the other brother remained missing.
- 25 November 2021, Panjshir Province, The Taliban reportedly issued a letter to its fighters in Panjshir ordering them to detain all social activists from Panjshir province.
- 26 November 2021, Kabul City, Kabul Province, The Taliban revoked the Afghanistan Independent Bar Association (AIBA)'s license and banned their activities.

Journalists: Killings and violent attacks

- 3 October 2021, District 5th, Jalalabad City, Nangarhar Province, it was reported that unknown armed men shot and killed Sayed Maroof Sadaat a prominent journalist and other people who were travelling with him in a car.
- 13 November 2021, Daytime, West of Kabul City, Kabul Province, Hamidullah Saighani a TV journalist working for Aryana news TV was killed by a magnetic bomb that was attached to his car.
- 19 November 2021, Kabul City, Kabul Province, A TV reporter was badly beaten by unknown armed men while he was returning home from work. He suffered serious injuries and was later hospitalized.
- 19 December 2021, Kabul, Kabul Province, an unknown individual stabbed and injured a journalist several times in the back at night.

Incidents involving legal professionals

- Former judge killed, on 29 November 2021, Daytime, Sahib Zadagan village, Khas Kunar District, Kunar province, it was reported that unknown armed men shot and killed Mr. Abdul Wahid Sahibzada, former head of the primary court of Chapdara District in Kunar Province.
- Lawyers conference stopped, 5 December 2021, Kartie Sae Area, Kabul city. The Taliban stopped a conference held by the Afghan Independent Bar Association in Kabul. According to the reports, armed Taliban fighters entered the conference and forced participants to leave.
- Family member tortured, 7 December 2021, Daykondi Province, a local man in a social media post claimed that the Taliban detained and tortured him on charges of being a family member of a former ministry of justice employee. The man posted pictures showing injuries caused by Taliban torture.
- Former judge detained, 12 December 2021, Bamyan City, Bamyan Province, The Taliban detained a former judge while he was trying to obtain a passport at the Bamyan passport office.
- Female defence lawyer's house raided, 28 December 2021, Kabul City, unknown armed men raided the house of a female defence lawyer. The intruders questioned the lawyer's family members about her whereabouts. When they refused to give up her location, her brother, her son-in-law and her sister were badly beaten.

Targeting dissenting voices

In addition to the cases outlined above, there have been many other incidents where civilians have been killed in unclear circumstances. It is very likely that many of these victims have been killed due to their criticism of the Taliban or for their dissenting views. One such case was that of Mohammed Khasha Zwana, a famous comedian who was detained, beaten and killed by Taliban soldiers in Kandahar in July. Another cultural figure – writer and poet Abdul Hatifi - was killed in Uruzgan the same month. Although the pace of attacks on religious scholars slowed somewhat from the pre-Taliban takeover, two more religious scholars were assassinated since mid-August, while another was seriously injured in a magnetic IED attack.

Extra judicial killings of former security forces

While SRMO's main focus is on HRDs and civil society, the human rights situation since August had also been marked by a wave of extra judicial killings and disappearances of former security forces including soldiers, police, and National Directorate of Security (NDS intelligence agency) personnel. This added to the overall threatening environment for all those who are seen as opposing the new regime. Although denied by the Taliban, many of these deaths are likely to be the result of revenge killings by the new Taliban de facto authorities despite the 'general amnesty' it issued in August for those who worked for the former government. In one such incident in October, the bodies of 21 former police/NDS were found dead with gunshot wounds in Daykundi Province. See text box for additional cases logged in SRMO's database.

- 6 male police officers killed, 2 disappeared
- Three former police women killed. Another policewoman and former prison manager Aliya Azizi disappeared on 9 October in Herat city and remains missing
- 4 NDS personnel killed
- 7 former government soldiers killed, 3 disappeared
- 1 pilot killed
- 1 translator killed

Evacuation of HRDs and CSAs after Taliban takeover

The US had already planned to have its military out of Afghanistan by September 2021. However, the Taliban's swift territorial advance resulted in a chaotic scramble to evacuate not just the remaining troops but thousands of other international personnel and Afghan staff who were considered at high risk of Taliban reprisals. After the Taliban took Kabul they gave the international community until 31st August to complete their withdrawal with no possibility of extension. A tense two week period followed.

The situation around the airport was particularly challenging and intensely dangerous for Afghans trying to leave, as some reported being beaten and abused by Taliban soldiers when trying to pass their checkpoints on the way to the airport.

Many Afghan employees of international organisations, international NGOs, journalists who had worked for international media were placed on various lists of 'special cases' or 'high risk individuals' that their colleagues tried to bring to the attention of officials from countries whose troops had a presence at the airport. Given the lack of time available, the chaotic nature of the situation and the difficulty accessing those with decision-making power, people's success getting permission to enter the airport and their ability to actually do so was completely ad hoc and not in any way based on a systematic assessment of need and risk. In many cases it depended who you knew, if you were able to get hold of them and how well connected they were. With the absence of a humanitarian corridor and a system to screen those most in danger it was, at times, left to the soldiers manning the airport gates to assess the level of risk to people trying to leave and make decisions over who to admit inside the airport boundary.

Anecdotal reports suggest that many well connected Afghans were able to enter the airport and get on flights, while many of those who were genuinely at high risk because of human rights work, journalism, or work in the legal profession had no such contacts or access. There seemed to be a disconnect with those making decisions on the evacuations and the needs on the ground. Officials from countries that had strongly encouraged activists to speak out publicly, campaign against human rights abuses and run for public office were often unable to help because of decisions taken by their home governments, leaving Afghan partners feeling betrayed.

In this disorganized process, many HRDs and CSOs fell through the cracks. Many, particularly those who worked in provincial and rural areas did not have the international connections to get themselves on evacuation lists. Many women HRDs had no evacuation assistance and many had to stay behind due to family commitments. The case of one WHRD with whom SRMO is familiar is illustrative; pregnant and travelling with small children, the WHRD was unable to get through the crowds to reach the airport, despite being on an evacuation list and holding the necessary permission to travel. HRDs and CSOs working for Afghan organisations or as individuals were not eligible for the various visa schemes, which were largely restricted to those who had been directly employed by foreign governments. Even many of those who do theoretically qualify to apply for these processes have experienced lengthy delays getting their applications registered let alone processed and approved. As a result many HRDs who were at the frontline of promoting human rights and exposing Taliban abuses were left behind and at great risk of reprisals. Many others remain stranded in between relocation programmes fearing deportation back to Afghanistan from interim locations and suffering from economic hardship.

The exact number of Afghans that have been evacuated is unknown, but the table below gives an idea of the approximate numbers that have fled to various key reception countries.

Country	Approximate/Estimated number of Afghans evacuated in 2021	Notes
US	118,000 during August airlift As of late November an estimated 8000 ²⁰ more people were understood to have been evacuated by US veterans groups or other informal networks in subsequent evacuations; this number likely includes some US nationals in addition to Afghans	As of late December, around 48,000 Afghans had been screened and resettled in the US. Around 26,000 others were undergoing processing at various military bases inside the US. ²¹ Still more were believed to be undergoing screening and quarantine at bases outside the US. The US has various different visa schemes for Afghans who worked directly for the US or in support of their operations. These include Special Immigrant Visas (SIV) and Priority 1/Priority 2 (P1/Ps). These processes can take years, and there is no guarantee of success. Other groups of Afghans have been given access to the US under the Humanitarian Parole system, which is faster but does not necessarily lead to the possibility of remaining in the US permanently.
Canada	6860 ²²	Canada has said it aims to resettle 40,000 Afghans in the coming years. There are various different resettlement schemes for different groups, including those who worked for/assisted Canada and those considered at high risk because of their involvement in human rights work, journalism etc. In January 2022 Canadian officials announced that 250 Afghans including 170 human rights defenders had arrived in Canada where they would be given asylum. Many of the arrivals (who flew to Canada from Pakistan) were part of a 'human rights defenders immigration stream' that was launched in July 2021. Others had worked closely with the Canadian government.
UK	Around 10,000 during August airlift and approximately 1500 since	The UK launched its Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) on 6 January 2022. The scheme aims to resettle 5000 Afghans in its first year and a total of 20,000 in the coming years. The scheme is designed for Afghans who 'stood up for values such as democracy, women's rights, freedom of speech, and rule of law' and 'vulnerable people', including women and girls and members of minority groups. Many activists were disappointed to learn that most of the initial resettlements would be of people who have already made it to the UK, leaving those in hiding in Afghanistan worried their wait will be a long one. In addition to those already in the UK, Afghans can also be referred to the scheme by UNHCR and a third channel will process former employees of the British Council and GardaWorld and former Chevening scholars. In order to be processed by UNHCR Afghans have to have left Afghanistan and registered in a third country.
Germany	Around 10,000 as of December 2021	German officials estimate that a further 10,000 Afghans with a 'firm assurance' of an eventual move to Germany remain in Afghanistan.

²⁰ <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-immigration-travel-lifestyle-kim-kardashian-west-346e0959989079e5fba109247967573c>

²¹ <https://www.axios.com/afghanistan-refugees-united-states-evacuation-750e9a56-b01e-480b-8360-efad1de44b5c.html>

²² <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/afghanistan/key-figures.html>

Country	Approximate/Estimated number of Afghans evacuated in 2021	Notes
		<p>Germany evacuated around 5,000 people during the August airlift. A further almost 5000 were evacuated during a second phase, primarily via Pakistan with smaller numbers leaving Afghanistan via Qatar. In addition to these channels Germany is exploring the possibility of routes via Central Asian states.</p> <p>In December German officials explained that projects were being established to help Afghan human rights defenders and media professionals continue their work from Germany or other countries.²³</p>
Ireland		<p>In the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover in August, Ireland granted 150 humanitarian visas for human rights defenders under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme. In September 2021 a further 500 visas were announced for family members of those already living in Ireland.</p>
Greece		<p>Home to Afghan Women's Parliament in Exile. 28 female MPs were given permission to stay in Greece for 6 months while they apply for resettlement in a range of other countries</p> <p>In November, Greece gave temporary refuge to a group of 103 female legal professionals (judges, lawyers, prosecutors) and their families. The women have been given temporary refuge while looking for permanent resettlement elsewhere. The women were evacuated after extensive lobbying by the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI).</p>

Protecting HRDs under Taliban rule: Recommendations to the international community

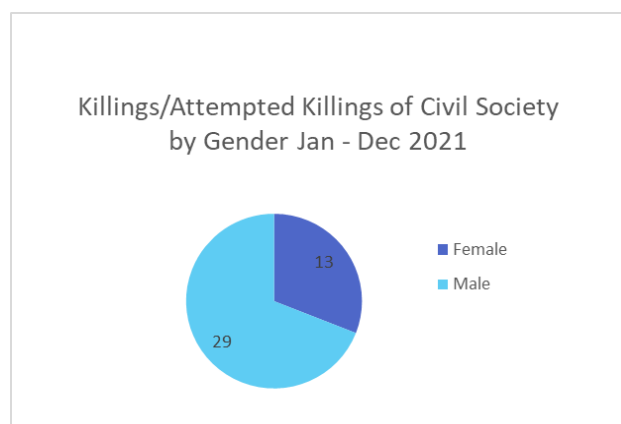
As detailed in SRMO's previous reports, HRDs had limited protection even under the previous government. The situation has now fundamentally deteriorated and Afghanistan is now an extremely hostile environment for those who work for human rights and the rule of law more generally. While Taliban spokesmen pay lip service to their respect for rights in a way that they would never have done in the late 1990s, references to rights are always qualified. The Taliban remain at pains to sound reasonable and pragmatic in their interactions with media and foreign governments, but there is little evidence this is anything other than a negotiating tactic to gain legitimacy with the international community.

Events to date suggest the Taliban will grow less tolerant rather than more as time goes on. Their initial promises of amnesty and tolerance have come to nothing. Even the most general criticism in a facebook post is enough to have someone arrested, tortured or even killed.²⁴ The patterns seen to date since the group's Kabul victory resonate with documented patterns of human rights violations and rights restrictive policies imposed by Taliban in the areas they already controlled prior to August;

²³ <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/laenderinformationen/afghanistan-node/action-plan-afghanistan/2503940>

²⁴ <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-killing-facebook-criticism/31592685.html>

a March 2021 report examining Taliban policy in these areas found that while there were ‘some tangible changes in media and communications, the education system, and the relations with NGOs, it does not indicate positive changes toward women’s rights, political freedoms, and political participation.’²⁵



Despite the lack of official recognition and ongoing sanctions against the de facto Taliban authorities, the international community is nevertheless in contact with the group and involved in various negotiation tracks on a range of issues, most pressingly the desperate humanitarian crisis.

This contact gives the key stakeholders and some large international aid agencies an important level of leverage with the Taliban. SRMO supports calls by the international

community for the Taliban to reinstate education for girls and women, and women’s access to public life and employment. While these are crucial issues that must be raised continually, SRMO urges the international community to also push the Taliban to ensure the safety of HRDs and civil society. It is important that HRDs are free to operate to ensure human rights pledges are respected by the Taliban.

The international community must also in the immediate term provide support for those HRDs who have fled Afghanistan, are struggling to establish themselves in their new countries and who in many cases have lost their livelihoods. These activists, with their extensive knowledge and experience, represent a valuable resource built in the course of 20 years that must not be lost. Support for civil society and creating the space to operate – both in Afghanistan and in exile - should be a key policy and resource priority, ensuring that human rights gains are protected.

Outlook – what can SRMO do now?

Despite the immense difficulties posed by Taliban rule, SRMO will strive to continue its work supporting HRDs both in Afghanistan and in exile. Our activities over the coming year will include the following:

- Monitoring, fact checking and verifying reports of human rights abuses, particularly those affecting HRDs and CSOs. Maintaining a database of incidents.
- Lobbying for assistance with evacuating HRDs and CSOs who are in immediate danger as a result of their work
- Lobbying the international community to pressure the Taliban in all available forum on the need to protect HRDs and CSOs and investigate abuses against them.
- Working as a focal point for HRDs and CSOs who are living in exile. Providing practical and networking support to these individuals and groups to enable them to continue to essential work.

²⁵ See <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CTC-SENTINEL-032021.pdf>, p.6

Annex 1: The Taliban and human rights: statements vs actions

What they say	What they do
<p>Media: In the Taliban’s first official press conference after taking the capital, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid on 17 August stated: ‘Once again I would like to assure the media, we are committed to media within our cultural frameworks. Private media can continue to be free and independent.....with some requests for the media. One, is that Islam is a very important value in our country and nothing should be against Islamic values..... The media should be impartial. Impartiality of the media is very important. They can critique our work, so that we can improve.’²⁶</p>	<p>There are regular reports of journalists being arrested and beaten by the Taliban when trying to carry out their journalistic work.²⁷</p> <p>The Taliban de-facto authorities have issued directives forbidding the publishing of news that goes against ‘national figures’, effectively banning any criticism of the new government.</p>
<p>Women: Mujahid stated ‘The issue of women is very important. The Islamic Emirate is committed to the rights of women within the framework of Sharia. Our sisters, our men have the same rights; they will be able to benefit from their rights. They are going to be working with us, shoulder to shoulder with us. The international community, if they have concerns, we would like to assure them that there’s not going to be any discrimination against women, but of course within the frameworks that we have. Our women are Muslim. They will also be happy to be living within our frameworks of Sharia.’</p> <p>In an open letter to the ‘people of the United States of America’ in February 2021, key Taliban negotiator (and the de facto government’s deputy prime minister) Mullah Baradar claimed the group was “committed to upholding and guaranteeing all rights of women afforded to them by Islamic law.”²⁸</p> <p>Muhammad Naem Wardak, spokesman for the Taliban's political office in a December 2021 interview stated: ‘We believe that our religion commands us that women have the right to work..... So, we are not against women's work and we are not against women's education, but the work and education must be arranged and organized to be in accordance with the traditions of our people. And women also must have the right to education and to work.’²⁹</p>	<p>Girls from around age 12 and above were banned from going to school in most areas.</p> <p>Girls were banned from attending public universities (some private universities are allowing girls to attend classes, albeit with strict segregation of the sexes)³⁰</p> <p>The majority of women have been dismissed from their jobs and told they must stay at home. Only a small number of women in essential roles such as nurses and midwives have been allowed to continue in their jobs.</p> <p>Women in many provinces have been instructed not to leave the house without a male relative. Women going to the shops or walking in their neighbourhoods without a chaperone have been beaten by Taliban soldiers. Taxi drivers have been told not to pick up lone women.</p> <p>In Balkh and Herat provinces, women have been banned from bath houses.</p> <p>Taliban de-facto authority closed the Ministry of Women Affairs.</p> <p>Women-led protests have been suppressed by the Taliban de-facto authorities and women have been whipped, beaten and sprayed with pepper spray for holding rallies demanding the right to education and to work.</p>

²⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/transcript-of-talibans-first-press-conference-in-kabul>

²⁷ <https://cpi.org/asia/afghanistan/>

²⁸ <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-170054>

²⁹ <https://www.npr.org/2021/12/15/1064001076/taliban-afghanistan-girls-education-womens-rights#:~:text=Music%20of%202021-,Taliban%20spokesman%20says%20women%20'must%20have%20the%20right%20to%20education,to%20education%20and%20to%20work.%22>

³⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/03/afghanistan-women-defiant-amid-taliban-crackdown>

What they say	What they do
<p>On interpreters: During the 17 August press conference, Mujahid said ‘We would like to assure you that nobody is going to knock on their door to inspect them, to ask them or to interrogate them as to who they have been working for or interpreting for. So I would like to assure you that no harm is going to be [done]. They’re going to be safe.’³¹</p>	<p>There have been numerous cases of former interpreters disappearing or being killed.</p>
<p>On soldiers/police/security forces from the previous government: Mujahid said ‘Thousands of soldiers who have fought us for 20 years, after the occupation, all of them have been pardoned. Those with families at the airport waiting, if they come back to their homes, no one is going to do anything to them; they will be safe.’³²</p>	<p>A Human Rights Watch report published on 30 November 2021 found that Taliban forces had executed or forcibly disappeared more than 100 former security force personnel since their victory in August.³³</p> <p>Reports of killings of former police, intelligence personnel and soldiers continued until the end of the year.</p>
<p>On Laws: Mujahid said ‘Let’s talk about the law after the government is formed. They’re going to decide what kind of laws are going to be presented to the nation. This will be the due responsibility of the future governments, with the participation of all people’³⁴</p>	<p>It is still unclear how the Taliban de-facto authorities will deal with the Afghan Constitution of 2004; they have reportedly said that they intend to implement the 1964 constitution of the former Afghan monarchy “without any content that contradicts Islamic law and the principles of the Islamic Emirate.”³⁵</p> <p>There are almost daily reports of heavy handed actions by Taliban soldiers claiming they are creating a secure environment for Afghans. These include fatal shootings at checkpoints, detentions, public beatings, torture while in detention and killings.</p> <p>Mullah Nooruddin Turabi - who was Minister of Justice during the first period of Taliban rule and who presided over the group’s notorious system of public executions, floggings and amputations - has been appointed head of the prison system.³⁶</p> <p>Mullah Abdul Hakim, the Taliban’s acting Minister of Justice in November announced that only Taliban approved lawyers would be permitted to operate. Lawyers are now required to register with the ministry and obtain a license.³⁷</p> <p>Female judges, prosecutors, and lawyers have lost their jobs and are no longer able to practice their profession. Not only that, but many have been harassed or worse by those they previously prosecuted, particularly those who worked on divorce or domestic violence cases.³⁸</p>

³¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/transcript-of-talibans-first-press-conference-in-kabul>

³² *ibid*

³³ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/11/30/afghanistan-taliban-kill-disappear-ex-officials>

³⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/transcript-of-talibans-first-press-conference-in-kabul>

³⁵ [Taliban Say They Will Use Parts of Monarchy Constitution to Run Afghanistan for Now \(voanews.com\)](https://voanews.com/story/taliban-say-they-will-use-parts-of-monarchy-constitution-to-run-afghanistan-for-now/611111)

³⁶ <https://apnews.com/article/religion-afghanistan-kabul-taliban-22f5107f1dbd19c8605b5b5435a9de54>

³⁷ <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/taliban-afghanistan-justice-system/31588972.html>

³⁸ <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghan-disabled-woman-prosecutor-jobless-taliban/31651273.html#:~:text=In%20November%2C%20the%20Taliban's%20justice,women%20from%20working%20in%20law.>

What they say	What they do
	The Ministry of Justice has also issued a decree bringing the formerly independent Afghanistan Independent Bar Association (AIBA) under the ministry's control. ³⁹
On government: 'Nobody should be left out, or any anybody with interests to serve the nation, they're not going to be ignored. So the future government will be inclusive. ' ⁴⁰	<p>No non-Taliban figures were included in the government, which is filled with hard liners and many individuals who appear on UN⁴¹ and US⁴² sanctions lists because of their involvement in attacks on civilians and/or terrorism.</p> <p>The Ministry of the Interior, led by US-designated terrorist Sirajuddin Haqqani, on 8 September 2021 banned all protests throughout the country. The Taliban de-facto authorities suppressed ongoing pockets of protests, mainly led by women, using excessive force including live ammunition to disperse the peaceful assemblies.</p>

Annex 2: Key cases of attacks and abuses against HRDs, CSAs and media workers Jan-Dec 2021

Date	Gender	Target	Perpetrator	Province	Incident Type	Number of victims
01/01/2021	Male	CSA	Unknown	Ghor	Targeted killing	1
08/01/2021	Male	CSA	Unknown	Baghlan	Attempted killing	1
08/01/2021	Male	CSA	Unknown	Kabul	Attempted killing	1
13/01/2021	Male	HRD family	Unknown	Balkh	Targeted killing	1
20/01/2021	Male	HRD	Taliban	Nangarhar	Death threat	1
21/01/2021	Male	CSA	Unknown	Paktia	Targeted killing	1
27/01/2021	Male	CSA	Unknown	Ghazni	Targeted killing	1
27/01/2021	Male	CSA	Unknown	Kabul	Attempted killing	1
11/02/2021	Male	CSA	Unknown	Faryab	Attempted killing	1
11/02/2021	Male	HRD	Taliban	Kabul	Death threat	1
13/02/2021	Male	HRD	Taliban	Kabul	Death threat	1
13/02/2021	Male	HRD	Taliban	Kabul	Death threat	1
14/02/2021	Male	HRD	Taliban	Kabul	Death threat	1
14/02/2021	Male	HRD	Taliban	Kabul	Death threat	1
14/02/2021	Female	WHRD	Taliban	Kabul	Death threat	1
14/02/2021	Male	HRD	Taliban	Kabul	Death threat	1
14/02/2021	Female	WHRD	Taliban	Nangarhar	Death threat	1
15/02/2021	Female	WHRD	Taliban	Kabul	Death threat	1
15/02/2021	Female	WHRD	Taliban	Kabul	Death threat	1
15/02/2021	Female	WHRD	Taliban	Kabul	Death threat	1

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/transcript-of-talibans-first-press-conference-in-kabul>

⁴¹ <https://scsanctions.un.org/h3q4hen-all.html#alqaedaind>

⁴² <https://www.treasury.gov/ofac/downloads/sdnlist.pdf>

16/02/2021	Female	WHRD	Taliban	Nangarhar	Death threat	1
16/02/2021	Female	Media worker	Taliban	Kabul	Death threat	1
16/02/2021	Male	Media worker	Taliban	Kabul	Death threat	1
16/02/2021	Male	CSA	Taliban	Kabul	Death threat	1
17/02/2021	Male	Media worker	Taliban	Kabul	Death threat	1
17/02/2021	Female	WHRD	Taliban	Kabul	Death threat	1
17/02/2021	Female	WHRD	Taliban	Kabul	Death threat	1
17/02/2021	Female	WHRD	Taliban	Kabul	Death threat	1
23/02/2021	Male	CSA	Taliban	Baghlan	Targeted killing	1
23/02/2021	Female	WHRD	Taliban	Kapisa	Death threat	1
25/02/2021	Male	CSA family	Unknown	Ghor	Targeted killing	3
02/03/2021	Female	Media worker	IS-KP	Nangarhar	Targeted killing	3
12/03/2021	Female	WHRD	Unknown	Kabul	Death threat	1
21/03/2021	Female	WHRD	Unknown	Baghlan	Targeted killing	1
12/04/2021	Female	CSA	Unknown	Kabul	Harassment	1
13/04/2021	Male	CSA	Unknown	Baghlan	Targeted killing	1
17/04/2021	Female	CSA	Unknown	Sari Pul	Targeted killing	1
29/04/2021	Male	CSA	Unknown	Herat	Targeted killing	1
06/05/2021	Male	Media worker	Unknown	Kandahar	Targeted killing	1
07/05/2021	Male	CSA	Unknown	Paktia	Targeted killing	1
27/05/2021	Female	WHRD	Taliban	Farah	Targeted killing	1
03/06/2021	Female	Media worker	Unknown	Kabul	Targeted killing	1
05/06/2021	Male	Media worker family	Unknown	Helmand	Harassment	1
12/06/2021	Female	Media worker	Unknown	Kabul	Targeted killing	2
12/06/2021	Male	CSA	Unknown	Kabul	Targeted killing	1
20/06/2021	Male	CSA	Unknown	Helmand	Targeted killing	1
06/07/2021	Male	CSA	Unknown	Kabul	Targeted killing	1
12/07/2021	Female	WHRD	Taliban	Logar	Detention	1
16/07/2021	Male	Media worker	NDS	Kandahar	Detention	4
07/08/2021	Male	CSA	Unknown	Nangarhar	Targeted killing	1
18/08/2021	Male	CSA	Taliban	Nangarhar	Targeted killing	2
06/09/2021	Male	Media worker	Taliban	Herat	Detention	1
07/09/2021	Male	Media worker	Taliban	Kabul	Detention	5
08/09/2021	Male	Media worker	Taliban	Herat	Detention	1
14/09/2021	Male	Media worker	Taliban	Herat	Detention	1
15/09/2021	Male	Media worker	Unknown	Paktia	Disappeared	1
03/10/2021	Male	Media worker	Taliban	Nangarhar	Targeted killing	1
12/10/2021	Male	CSA	Unknown	Nangarhar	Targeted killing	1
14/10/2021	Male	CSA	Taliban	Balkh	Detention	1
15/10/2021	Male	CSA	Taliban	Kabul	Detention	1
24/10/2021	Male	Media worker	Taliban	Nangarhar	Harassment	2
02/11/2021	Male	CSA	Unknown	Nangarhar	Targeted killing	2
02/11/2021	Female	WHRD	Unknown	Balkh	Targeted killing	4
02/11/2021	Female	CSA	Taliban	Kabul	Detention	1

13/11/2021	Male	Media worker	Unknown	Kabul	Targeted killing	1
19/11/2021	Male	Media worker	Unknown	Kabul	Harassment	1
19/12/2021	Male	Media worker	Taliban	Kunduz	Disappeared	1
19/12/2021	Male	Media worker	Unknown	Kabul	Attempted killing	1
23/12/2021	Male	CSA	Unknown	Nangarhar	Targeted killing	1
26/12/2021	Male	Media worker	Taliban	Kabul	Detention	1

About the Report Authors

Horia Mosadiq: Founder and member of the board responsible for Donor Liaison and emergency assistance for HRDs and WHRDs

Horia is a well-known and widely respected human rights defender from Afghanistan with more than 20 years of work experience in defending and promoting human rights and women's human rights in Afghanistan. She has extensive experience in dealing with cases of HRDs at risk in Afghanistan and has provided human rights and safety training for NGOs and civil society organizations around Afghanistan. In her previous capacity as the Afghanistan Researcher with Amnesty International, Horia conducted in depth research and analyses of the situation of HRDs, mainly WHRDs, in Afghanistan and conducted a number of trainings and needs assessment workshops on the protection of HRDs in Afghanistan. As a long-standing human rights defender herself Horia is well familiar with the risks, threats and challenges HRDs in Afghanistan face and with the solutions that need to be put in place. Horia has attended many high profile international forums on Afghanistan to advocate for advancement and protection of human rights of Afghan citizens and HRDs. She has extensive contacts and is well respected within the civil society and human rights community in Afghanistan and internationally. In addition Horia worked with the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission and was a Managing Director of a human rights organization in Afghanistan, the Human Rights Research and Advocacy Consortium (HRRAC).

Zamarey Faqiri: Director Safety and Operational Manager of SRMO

Zamarey has more than 15 years' experience in the security and safety management of NGOs in Afghanistan. He is a highly experienced safety adviser with an extensive network of NGO and security contacts throughout Afghanistan. He has particular expertise in the sensitivities surrounding the work of human rights activists and women's rights defenders in the Afghan context. He previously held senior positions with the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO/ INSO) and the United Nations Department for Safety and Security (UNDSS) in Afghanistan. In these roles he monitored, assessed and managed threats to the security and safety of NGOs and UN staff working in Afghanistan. He also conducted extensive security training, something he continues to do in his role at SRMO.

Lucy van der Kroft, Researcher

Lucy is a freelance researcher on Afghanistan and the Middle East. Lucy holds a Masters degree in Middle East and Central Asia Security Studies from the University of St Andrews, and a Bachelors degree in Arabic with Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies from Durham University. Lucy previously worked on the Amnesty International Afghanistan research team, at a policy research institute in Kabul and as a Middle East Analyst in London.

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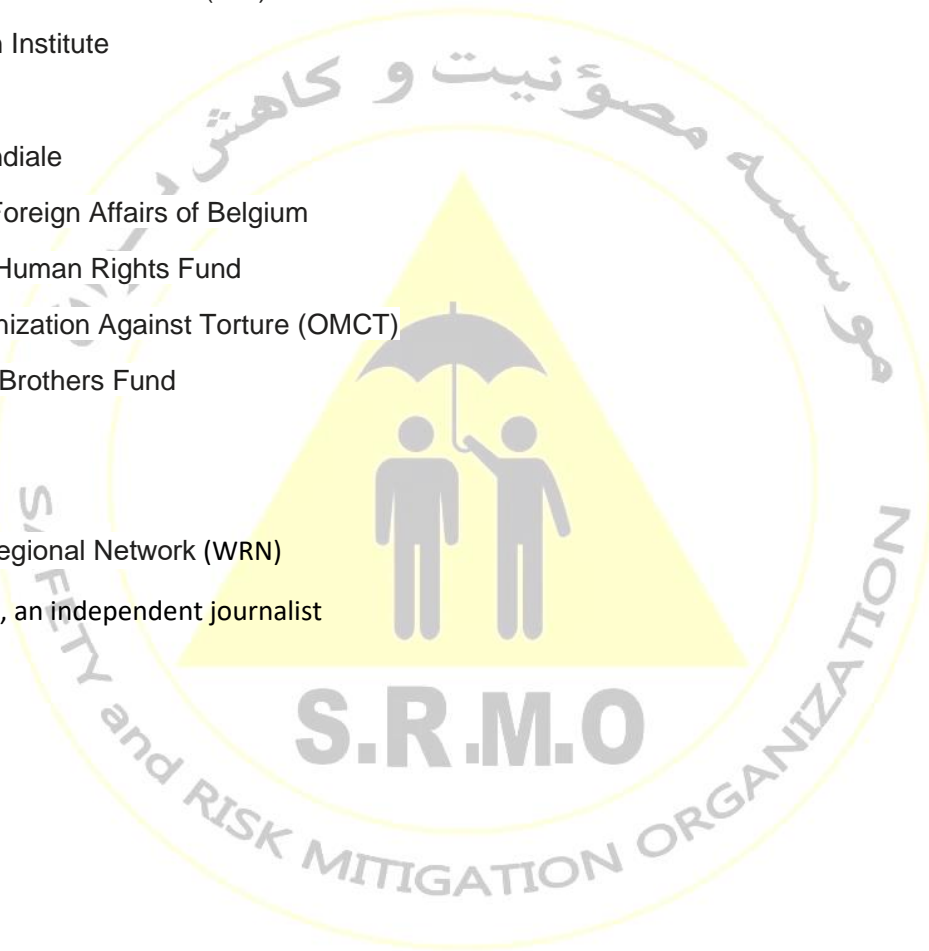
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