

Afghanistan: In rare move, government launches investigations into systematic sexual abuse of children

Press release

Geneva/Kabul, 7 January 2020 - Two human rights organisations welcome the move by the Attorney General's Office of Afghanistan to initiate investigations into the systematic and culturally widely accepted sexual abuse of boys by State officials, warlords and other powerful individuals. This follows evidence collected by two human rights defenders on hundreds of such cases in the Logar province, in the eastern part of the country.

"This is a remarkable development" said Sayed Hussain Anosh, Executive Director of the Civil Society and Human Rights Network (CSHRN). *"We very much welcome the investigation into the widespread sexual abuse of children, a tabooed practice that has been ignored by the public and the government alike for decades."*

In November 2019, Ehsanullah Hamidi and Musa Mahmoudi, who worked for CSHRN, revealed the sexual abuse of hundreds of boys from six different schools in the Logar province, with teachers, headmasters and local officials involved. Shortly afterwards, the two human rights defenders received threats and were arbitrarily detained by the National Directorate of Security for several days. While kept incommunicado, the defenders were forced to make an apology on camera for their research being "incorrect" and "incomplete".

All of this however changed in December, when the Attorney General's Office stated that it would investigate the cases, and senior members of the office have now started to look into the evidence collected by the two human rights defenders.

Afghanistan has a long history of sexual abuse of children by private individuals as well as State officials, amounting to torture and other ill-treatment. The practice of *Bachabazi* (meaning "dancing boys" or "boys play") is a contemporary form of child sex slavery. The boys, who often come from impoverished families, dress as women and perform as dancers at private parties before being raped by their masters and others. *Bachabazi* and practices similar to those revealed in Logar are widely accepted and not understood as homosexual behavior. Alleged perpetrators are governmental officials or are connected to the security services and use their power to escape punishment, while the boys are sometimes victims of "honour killings" at the hands of their own families. The UN Committee against Torture and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child have raised serious concerns about the inaction of the State and the impunity perpetrators have always enjoyed.

"Investigations into those horrific practices are a first step into addressing Afghanistan's culture of impunity for torture and ill-treatment of children", said Gerald Staberock, Secretary General of the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT). *"It is equally important that all threats and harassment of human rights defenders, including those who revealed the Logar abuse cases, are promptly and thoroughly investigated."*

The CSHRN and the OMCT ask the Attorney General's Office to implement its international human rights obligations and to enforce the Afghan Penal Code prohibiting child abuse by carrying out prompt, impartial investigations that lead to the punishment of perpetrators and provide for the rehabilitation and integration of victims and their families.

The World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) is the largest global NGO group actively standing up to torture and protecting human rights defenders worldwide. It has more than 200 members in 90 countries. Its international secretariat is based in Geneva, Switzerland.

The Civil Society and Human Rights Network (CSHRN) is the main human rights network in Afghanistan with more than 160 member organisations. Its secretariat is based in Kabul.

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