

Learning Human Rights Lessons

Afghan kids to be taught the principles of human rights in effort to heal wounds of war and unite the country.

Afghanistan, conscious that human rights are not deeply rooted in its conservative society and took a severe beating during 23 years of savage war, is to make the teaching of them compulsory in schools.

The transitional government headed by President Hamed Karzai hopes that educating Afghans in fundamental human rights will help heal the wounds of war, prevent future conflicts and unite the country still divided along ethnic and tribal lines.

“If a person does not know his rights, he will never gain them,” Mohammad Farid Hamidi, a member of Afghanistan’s Independent Commission on Human Rights, told IWPR. “And a person who knows his rights will not try to deprive someone else of theirs.”

The commission was established as part of the Bonn agreement for a future Afghanistan following the collapse of the hard line Taleban regime over a year ago. It aims to set up local offices in the provinces, some of which are still controlled by powerful warlords outside Kabul’s control, to monitor human rights abuses.

According to commission members, all of these local commanders, some of whom have been accused of running illegal checkpoints to raise millions of dollars in customs duties, clamping down on the local media, running private prisons to settle scores or extract money from the wealthy, and other abuses of power, have all agreed to cooperate with its monitors.

Hamidi said the commission will operate in various sections looking at specific issues such as women’s and children’s rights and education.

They are likely to be kept busy in a country where many children as young as five are forced to work full-time, without the chance of an Education; where widows are often forced by local custom to marry relatives of their late husband, even if they are small children; and where in some parts of the country women have no rights to divorce.

The commission will also look at the issue of transitional justice, drawing from the experience of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission and other bodies set up to examine and judge crimes of the past.

A referendum is to be held in Afghanistan to decide whether crimes and human rights abuses committed during the war years should be subject to punishment or amnesty, or a combination of both as in South Africa, Hamidi said.

But it is education that will be first priority of the commission, after receiving the support of the education ministry and its agreement to start introducing human rights as a subject in the national curriculum from the beginning of the new school year which opens on March 24.

The scheme will begin with a pilot project in a few schools, and will be expanded to the whole country once

it is fine-tuned.

Young children will be taught basic rights such as freedom of speech and respect for other people's opinions and ideas.

Older pupils will be introduced to more complex subjects, such as the articles of the universal human rights declaration, the benefits of peace and the harm caused by war.

Professor Mohammad Abol Irhrar Ramzpor, of Kabul University's faculty of law and political science, said the new programme would be particularly useful in educating Afghans in democracy and the political process as the country prepares for the first fully democratic elections in the country's history, due to be held next year.

"It will also bring alive in people's minds the concepts of human rights and national unity," he told IWPR, adding that human rights should also be taught in military and police colleges.

According to Zabibullah Ismati, deputy head of training in the education ministry, one of the most important things the students would learn from this new programme would be the importance of fighting terrorism, at a time when remnants of Al-Qaeda, Taleban and other dissident Islamic guerrilla groups have joined forces in the country and declared war against foreign troops brought in to establish security.

"The students will learn about the negative impacts of terrorism on people, and that terrorism is a deadly phenomenon that must be actively fought," he said. "They will also learn about the benefits of national unity, which is crucial for the future existence of Afghan society."

Margaret Ladner, of the international human rights group Amnesty International, said two basic processes were involved in educating people in the subject.

"The first is to know about human rights, and the second is to appreciate them. If the first is applied, proper conditions will be created for the application of the second," she said.

"Human rights form the basis of every society. If people know about them, they can resist violence. Every member of society should know about his or her rights, and the rights of others."

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Location: [Afghanistan](#)

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