

Work of Afghan Human Rights Body Questioned

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Locals claim that few Afghans have even heard of the flagship organisation.

Officials and activists in Paktia have criticised the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) as ineffective and poorly managed.

Some argued that few Afghans in the eastern province were aware of the organisation's existence, let alone had benefitted from its work.

Others claimed that the flagship organisation had ignored fundamental rights issues.

"The work of the commission just isn't tangible to people here," said Paktia provincial council head Malik Zazi.

"It's as though their aims are only symbolic; it doesn't appear to work to improve human rights at all.

"They claim to represent all men, women and children but in effect they pick and choose who to fight for."

Shafiq Sahar, a member of Paktia's youth and parliamentary affairs committee, alleged that representatives had failed to carry out basic outreach or inspection work.

"People in Paktia aren't even aware of the existence of AIHRC," said Sahar. "We've not heard of them visiting prisons or engaging with the police, the army or the National Directorate of Security [Afghanistan's domestic intelligence agency]."

"Whilst there's no question that the culture and traditions of Afghanistan can hamper their work, this shouldn't be seen as an excuse."

Critics in Paktia highlighted the case of a sacked AIHRC employee, 38-year-old Khadija, to illustrate their criticisms.

Khadija, who lost her husband in a suicide bomb attack four years ago, claimed she had been sacked from the AIHRC office with no notice after a row with senior colleagues.

The mother-of-five said that after officials had broadened her duties to include cooking, cleaning and gardening, she was fired for failing to feed a flock of sheep owned by senior staff.

Gardez resident Khadija said, "Last year the director and some other staff bought six sheep and told me to take care of them.

"I did that for six months but one day I got ill and had to stay at home. When I went back to work the next day the director was furious with me, saying the sheep hadn't been fed.

"I begged for forgiveness but nobody listened and the very same day I was fired from my job."

Noor Ahmad Shahim, AIHRC's regional director in Paktia, dismissed these allegations as baseless, insisting, "We have only ever briefly kept a few lambs here [to sacrifice at Eid] and then we sent them to Kabul.

"We never made Khadija wash the dishes, polish our boots or iron our clothes."

He went on to add that his office had even provided Khadija's disabled son with a motorbike to allow him to get around more easily.

Shahim said, "This woman is attempting to defame me. It's common in any organisation, including government, to fire staff for wrongdoings."

Such complaints against the AIHRC reflected a wider prejudice against the organisation, he continued.

"No matter how hard we try people don't seem to want to accept us," he said.

"Whenever a case of human right arises in Paktia, Khost, and Paktika we always intervene. We've visited prisons and 99 per cent of torture has been eradicated.

"Last year, we visited the prison in Paktia and talked to the authorities concerned."

The AIHRC has previously come under fire for not having done enough to confront the legacy of war crimes

committed in Afghanistan over more than three decades of conflict.

It has also been called on to do much more to support women's rights, particularly in more remote parts of the country.

Abdullah Hasrat, a spokesman for Paktia's provincial governor, said he believed that AIHRC staff needed to improve the quality of their work.

"It's true that people here are dissatisfied with them," he said. "Their performance is poor but the governor of the province can't interfere in their affairs because it's an independent organisation."

One problem, according to local activist Aryan, was that Paktia residents had yet to see noticeable improvements in human rights issues.

"Women in the province face domestic violence and a lack of health care facilities, but no organisation seems to be working to address this," she continued.

"We're not seeing any improvements - everything remains the same."

Another issue the organisation has faced is being seen as an international import defending foreign values.

Juma Gul Ahmadzai, a civil society activist, accused the AIHRC of failing to stand up to Western coalition forces when military strikes led to civilian deaths.

He said, "When foreigners bombs civilians in error the AIHRC office just sits quietly without reacting.

"But isn't this a crime against humanity? It seems they're happy to take Western salaries but not represent Afghans."

But others defended the AIHRC, arguing that people had unrealistic expectations of what one human rights body could accomplish.

Ziarat Gul, head of an educational centre in Paktia, noted that critics needed to be aware there were limits to the organisation's role.

"People assume the office should be able to address and solve every problem they raise," he said.

"But once the AIHRC has relayed an issue to the relevant authority it's then up to that authority to act. It's not the responsibility of the AIHRC office."

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