

## New call for justice in Afghanistan

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By Carlotta Gall

Kabul - The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission urged President Hamid Karzai on Saturday to bring war criminals to justice after a long era of human rights abuses.

Sima Samar, the chairwoman of the Afghan commission, and Louise Arbour, U. N. rights commissioner, presented Karzai with a national survey and recommendations on dealing with past war crimes and human rights abuses. The commission concluded that more than 70 percent of Afghans had suffered a loss or injury over the last two decades of war and that Afghans urgently wanted to see war criminals brought to justice.

"Of central importance is the need to address past and present human rights violations so as to ensure that those responsible for egregious abuses do not succeed in wielding power," Arbour told Karzai and others at a ceremony at the presidential palace.

She called for a "courageous system of justice" to redress wrongs and create a stable foundation for Afghan society.

The report presented to Karzai recommends that he take actions symbolic and substantive to address the abuses of the past, including building monuments, supporting criminal investigations and prosecutions, and arranging for reparations for the victims, as well as vetting public officials to keep perpetrators of abuse out of power.

The comments of the human rights officials, and the survey results, go against the current policy of the U.N. mission in Afghanistan and Karzai's own government, which have for the last three years avoided pursuing suspects in war crimes in the interest of national stability. The United Nations, which has commissioned a compilation of human rights abuses in Afghanistan over the last 25 years, has repeatedly delayed the publication of the report, apparently, diplomats in Kabul said, for fear of doing damage to the fragile political process, since many accused of war crimes remain in powerful positions around the country.

Samar, whose husband and his three brothers were arrested and executed during the Russian occupation of Afghanistan, said her conclusion is that Afghans want urgently to see justice carried out, in the belief that it will contribute to stability, rather than undermine it. While that might not be easy, she said, the president would have the support of the people to start the effort. "Without justice, we cannot have long-term peace and stability and national unity," she said.

Afghans have suffered so many abuses under various governments that many say they see the last two decades as a seamless era of terror.

Under the communists, thousands disappeared into prisons. In 10 years of Soviet occupation, which ended in 1989, 1 million died and 5 million -- a third of the population -- were forced to flee Afghanistan as villages across the country were indiscriminately bombed. The period after the Soviet occupation was a lawless time of factional fighting that destroyed many towns and much of Kabul, the capital, killing tens of thousands more people. The Taliban followed, instituting a repressive fundamentalist rule, and waging war against its opponents for seven years.

The survey, "A Call for Justice," was conducted over eight months. It is the first broad consultation with the Afghan people about what they want to do now about the suffering they experienced. The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission asked more than 6,000 people, using questionnaires and focus groups, whether they had suffered and how, and what form of justice they wanted, if any.

The commission reported finding a very high level of human rights violations and described them as "staggering statistics in comparison to any other conflict in the world." Of the 2,000 people who joined focus group discussions, 500 said they had experienced a death among relatives, 400 said someone in their immediate family had been tortured or detained, and 69 percent considered themselves victims of human rights violations over the last 23 years of violence.

Among the 4,151 questioned in the survey, 76.4 percent said they wanted to see war criminals brought to justice now or within five years, and 90 percent wanted the government to go beyond enforcing typical criminal justice and take actions like investigating public officials and removing perpetrators from office, setting up a system for researching and recording what happened in the previous eras and arranging for reparations for the victims.

Although Karzai has tried to include warlords and other powerful players in his government, and is pursuing a policy to bring former Taliban members into the fold to achieve stability, the commission report says that only holding people accountable for past crimes will bring lasting stability and peace.