

The World; Report Criticizes U.S. Approach in Afghanistan; Short-sighted tactics have allowed warlords to join the government and prisoner abuse and other crimes to occur, a rights group says.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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The report also called for the U.S. government to investigate Taliban detainees for human rights abuses before releasing them. It cited the case of Mullah Shahzada, a former Taliban commander, who was released from U.S. custody despite his alleged role in a series of massacres in the late '90s.

FULL TEXT

Washington's short-sighted approach in Afghanistan has put warlords in power and allowed U.S. military forces to engage in prisoner abuse and criminal activities, a human rights report released Sunday said.

The 168-page report by the Afghanistan Justice Project, an independent research and advocacy organization, documented atrocities from the beginning of the Soviet Union's 1978 pre-invasion intervention through today.

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"The U.S. has replicated some of the same practices that characterized the ... Soviet regime it opposed in the late 1980s, as well as some of the brutal tactics employed by the feuding commanders during the early 1990s," said Patricia Gossman, the report's main researcher.

The report also faulted the U.S. for overlooking abuses committed by some of its Afghan allies in the fight against the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

"The Taliban remain a lethal force, with support likely coming from Pakistan – and a number of the commanders the U.S. has backed have strengthened their positions against rivals, entrenched themselves deeper in the political landscapes and continued to engage in abuse and criminal activities," the report said.

The group, funded by George Soros' Open Society Institute, spent three years researching its report, starting in 2001, and interviewed thousands of people who said they witnessed large-scale massacres, torture, rape and other atrocities.

"Many of the communist-time war criminals are running free in Europe and the U.S., while others are in high-power positions here in President Karzai's Cabinet," Gossman said. "We want these people who are responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity excluded from political office."

Several of President Hamid Karzai's current and past Cabinet members are repeatedly mentioned in the witness accounts, including Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, senior advisor to the president; Minister of Energy Ismail Khan; Vice President Karim Khalili; Foreign Minister Abdullah and Army Chief of Staff Abdul Rashid Dostum.

Gossman said the report had been presented to Karzai's administration, but officials had no immediate response to it.

Karzai's administration has said in the past that it has pursued a policy of inclusion to prevent challenges to the central government, whose power remains weak. And Karzai spokesman Mohammed Karim Rahimi reacted to a similar report by Human Rights Watch last week that singled out Dostum, Khalili and Sayyaf by saying, "These people have contributed a lot to peace and stability in postwar Afghanistan."

Asked about the report, Lt. Cindy Moore, a military spokeswoman in Afghanistan, said today that the U.S. was "fully committed to investigating any and all allegations" about detainee abuse. But she referred all further questions to officials in Washington.

The report also accuses Ahmed Shah Masoud, the slain leader of the Northern Alliance who fought the Taliban, and his minister of defense, Gen. Mohammed Qassim Fahim, of ignoring systematic executions and abuse of war prisoners.

However, the report concedes that bringing war criminals to trial in Afghanistan is not feasible in the immediate future because the country's justice system is not developed enough.

"It is not the responsibility of the human rights organizations to formally put these criminals on trial," said Ahmad Nader Nadery, spokesman for the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, which backs Gossman's report. "We are here to document the atrocities that have occurred and release the information to the public."

Activists hope Afghans will use the report, which names many warlords and commanders accused of abuses, when they vote in parliamentary elections in September.

The electoral vetting system has been criticized as weak and incapable of eliminating candidates who have committed human rights violations or war crimes. Afghanistan's electoral management body recently announced

that of 208 candidates suspected of links to armed groups, 17 had been eliminated.

Officials also recommended that Russia declassify information related to the Afghan-Soviet war of the 1980s.

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"U.S. officials were apparently unaware of the commander's past record, which indicates either a serious intelligence failure or indifference to war crimes that do not fall under the official designation of 'terrorist acts,' " the report said.

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