

## HUMAN RIGHTS

## An Afghan doctor's prescription for peace

Human rights officials in Afghanistan have documented thousands of violations in the last 18 months, including illegal detentions, forced evictions, street kidnappings with rape, trafficking, attacks on women not wearing burqas and assaults targeting new girls' schools, says Dr. Sima Samar, chair of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission.

"It is not safe — even here in the capital — and human rights violations are constant," she told *CMAJ* during an interview at the AIHRC headquarters in Kabul.

"Violations of women's rights and human rights continue with impunity. Girls' schools are set on fire by fundamentalists. Trafficking of women and children continues. Tactics of intimidation are used to stop people and especially women from exercising their human rights. Prisons hold women and men illegally," she wrote in the commission's 2003–2004 annual report.

Private prisons and militias also operate, contributing to an increasing number of illegal detentions and disappearances, says Samar, who is building a network of commission offices across Afghanistan.

Samar, a surgeon and women's rights activist, was appointed chair of the commission after serving as deputy prime minister and minister for women's affairs in the first 6 months of the Afghan Transitional Authority's first term.

Peacekeepers, including 1000 Canadians housed at Camp Julien

outside of Kabul, are essential at this stage of Afghanistan's reconstruction, Samar emphasizes. Despite a new Constitution and Bill of Rights that pledge to abide by international human rights treaties and conventions, and guarantee fair political representation and equal rights for women, those rights are not yet widespread or enforced.

"Rights are not real without security," Samar says. "Increasing poverty — with no real alternatives — makes it easy to have huge tracts of land consigned to opium-poppy cultivation. No one seems able to stand up to the warlords." Afghanistan is the world's number one opium producer.

Samar is concerned about the emphasis on military presence and security to the exclusion of international aid and expertise that establishes gender-inclusive institutions and structures to rebuild civil society. Devoting the majority of limited resources to the military starves efforts to rebuild the justice sector and achieve sustainable peace, she warns.

"I continue to believe that the rehabilitation of our society can only be achieved by integrating and accentuating the role of women in the reconstruction process," she says.

"Rampant corruption and the absence of effective reform mechanisms in government institutions have caused the loss of credibility of our legal and judicial systems in particular," Samar wrote in her report. "In the face of forced marriages and

hopelessness about their lives, young women are committing suicide by self-immolation."



Col. John Bradley, DND

**Most women in Afghanistan continue to wear burqas because it's dangerous not to, says Samar.**

In January 2003, Physicians for Human Rights reported that "more than 70% of Afghan women suffered from major depression, nearly two-thirds were suicidal and 16% had already attempted suicide."

"No one should doubt how much the average Afghan wants peace and democracy," Samar says.

Afghanistan ranks in the bottom 5 on the UN Human Development Index and in the top 3 levels of infant mortality and childbirth deaths. It is also home to the largest return of refugees ever recorded (2 million). — *Marilou McPhedran*, Kabul, Afghanistan

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