The Washington Post
February 27, 2003

By Felice D. Gaer and Michael K. Young

The U.S. is still far from achieving a lasting humanitarian victory.

Even as attention shifts to Iraq, America needs to be careful not to forget that its work in Afghanistan is just beginning. We have spent billions of dollars and lost precious lives to vanquish the Taliban. Yet the groundwork is being laid in Afghanistan for a regime that may be almost as repressive as the Taliban, particularly with regard to religious freedom. This is occurring with consent and, in some cases, help from the United States. When President Bush meets with Afghan President Hamid Karzai today, he should tell him that it is essential to entrench freedom, not its enemies.

There are disturbing reports that an extreme and strict interpretation of Islamic law, or sharia, is being nurtured in the post-Taliban era. Moreover, attempts are being made to include some of the harshest and most discriminatory elements of sharia in the new constitution and judicial system. The notorious Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which enforced religious conformity and meted out harsh punishments under the Taliban, has reemerged in a supposedly gentler guise. Abuses against women and girls continue, apparently with the support of police and the courts. Women and girls finally have the opportunity to go to school, but recent attacks and threats against schools for girls are keeping many away.

Major concerns regarding human rights in Afghanistan include:

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Misguided judicial activism by Afghanistan's chief justice, including the endorsement of amputations and other abusive corporal punishments and public death threats to recalcitrant non-Muslims.

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Coercive measures (including on-the-spot beatings) by official agencies, including religious police organizations, that require Afghans to follow specific religious practices and require women to conform to stringent codes of dress, movement and behavior.

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Blasphemy charges against reformers.

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Torture and other maltreatment of prisoners, including reports of incidents resulting in mass deaths (of which there have been no thorough, credible investigations).

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Mistreatment of returning refugees and internally displaced persons, including reports of forced repatriation.

Religious freedom and other international human rights protections, particularly for Afghan women and girls, must be guaranteed in Afghanistan's new constitution. A draft of the constitution is expected early next month in preparation for Afghanistan's national assembly, or loya jirga, this year. Women's rights reportedly are being ignored, as are equal rights for religious minorities. The new constitution may lessen the human rights protections of the 1964 constitution, which declared: "The people of Afghanistan, without any discrimination or preference, have equal rights and obligations before the law." If efforts to impose a strict reading of sharia are left unchecked and unopposed, a woman's testimony in court will be counted as only half that of a man.

Several key cabinet posts have gone to leaders or members of extremist groups or ruthless warlord factions. Some of these appointments were made on the advice of the U.S. government.

Since 1999, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent federal agency, has opposed egregious violations of religious freedom in Afghanistan. Contrary to common perceptions, vigilance on these matters is still needed under the Karzai government.

The commission has recommended to the Bush administration and to Congress that the United States promptly appoint a high-ranking official to the embassy in Kabul with the responsibility to promote, coordinate, monitor and report on the implementation of international standards of human rights -- including religious freedom -- in the new Afghan government. This person would encourage the Karzai government to guarantee these rights in the new constitution and would ensure that U.S. and U.N. aid went only to those local leaders and law enforcement officials who "firmly demonstrate respect for human rights," as the U.N. Security Council has specified. The envoy would send a message that security and respect for human rights must go hand in hand.

The United States and other nations must take this opportunity to secure the just and lasting peace made possible by military victory. Warlords must not be given free rein to reestablish repression. What we do in Afghanistan is a prelude to Iraq. We must not let the opportunity to advance religious tolerance and human rights slip through our grasp -- or the grasp of the people of Afghanistan.

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