
PRAXIS Interviews Practitioners: Norah Niland

Norah Niland is a visiting fellow at The Institute for Human Security at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. She has spent much of her professional life with the United Nations, including field assignments on development, humanitarian, and human rights issues in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, and Afghanistan, as well as at UN Headquarters. From January 1999 to June 2002, she worked in Afghanistan as the senior human rights advisor reporting to the UN Coordinator and the High Commissioner for Human Rights. She has a Masters of Philosophy in Peace Studies from Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland.

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF HUMAN SECURITY AS A DISTINCT FOCUS IN THE AFGHAN CONTEXT?

Much more study and reflection is required on the changing nature of the global economy and post-Cold War, post-9/11 global re-ordering to better understand the implications of these two processes on the lives, livelihoods, and aspirations of people trapped in situations of endemic poverty and political turmoil.

It is still early days in post-Taliban, post-Bonn Afghanistan but it is increasingly apparent that attempts to marginalize human rights from security, recovery, and constitutional or judicial reform—to name just a few of the ingredients that constitute the Bonn formula for peace—is unwise and unethical. The re-imposition of ruthless warlords as part of the Afghan component of the ‘war on terror’ has had numerous consequences that threaten immediate and longer-term prospects for peace and efforts to improve socio-economic indicators that are among the worst in the world.

The north of Afghanistan is one of the most troubled parts of the country but it is an apt if unfortunate illustration of warlordism. Ever since the routing of the Taliban in November 2001, different political-cum-military factions, which were swept back to power courtesy of the coalition, have raped, plundered, and fought each other just as they did in the early 1990s, leading to new population movements. Little has been done to safeguard the rights of civilians or to hold perpetrators to account. Afghans have been vocal and courageous in articulating their opposition to the central, prominent, and dominant role of ‘the men with guns’ in the Transitional Administration. However, the inability of Afghan civil

society to have any significant say on decisions and arrangements that undermine their security and well-being has eroded confidence in the peace process, a factor that has major implications for its viability. The absence of a recovery strategy geared toward ameliorating deep-rooted structural inequalities—embedded in socio-economic and political disparities that help sustain poverty and profound underdevelopment—explains, in part, tensions between groups and the fear of being marginalized by the Bonn process.

In sum, it was a mistake to attempt trade-offs between short-term stability, which never materialized, and longer-term security, which is now in question. A peace formula that did not prioritize coalition

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objectives over the human security needs of Afghan civilians would have enjoyed greater support and fewer impediments, and would be better situated to nurture the constitutional, judicial, and military reforms vital to sustainable peace and development in Afghanistan.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES TO OPERATIONALIZING THE IDEAS THAT UNDERPIN HUMAN SECURITY IN AFGHANISTAN?

The central challenge is the absence of political will to address the issue of impunity and the untrammelled power of warlords who run different patches of territory as individual fiefdoms with little or no reference to the central authorities in Kabul.

It is extremely difficult to operate in a lawless environment whether as a private investor, a humanitarian worker, a development practitioner, or a villager wishing to trade in a nearby market. Conceptualizing a rural development scheme, for example, is difficult if the concerned community is unable to participate in consultations and decision-making to define the nature and scope of the planned changes.

In war-torn Afghanistan, there are lots of issues that need to be addressed if the country is going to extricate itself from its past. It is unhelpful to expect overnight miracles or to equate peace with the departure of the Taliban. But it is equally unhelpful not to

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demarcate a political line in the sand that signals an end to the rule of the gun and the unchecked practices of abusive commanders.

As elsewhere, peace is a process that needs to be grounded in beneficial and sustainable changes, including security, human rights, and economic dividends that are discernible and tangible to the average citizen. In Afghanistan, major threats to the peace—and by extension the security and well-being of individuals—are the expansion of the war economy largely due to illicit trade and the further empowerment of warlords that occurs at the social, political, and economic expense of Afghan civilians. ■