



# HELSINKI COMMISSION BRIEFING

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UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

**Testimony :: Hon. Alcee L. Hastings**

**Chairman - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

Afghanistan has been taking important steps towards building a stable, lawful and democratic state. However, it still faces a legacy of egregious human rights violations committed in the context of more than two decades of armed conflict. Rule of law and protection of human rights remains fragile. Human rights defenders and civil society leaders face harassment, intimidation, and violence. Women still face many obstacles.

Under the Taliban, women were forbidden to work, leave the house without a male escort, or seek medical help from a male doctor, and were forced to cover themselves from head to toe. While significant progress has been made since then, women and girls continue to be threatened and even attacked as they try to go to work or school. Schoolgirls, schools, and teachers have been one target. High profile women working outside the home have been another target. Nevertheless, many prominent female professionals and policymakers continue their work on behalf of women and for a new Afghanistan, including our witness today.

Afghan law provides for freedom of speech and of the press. Independent media are active and reflect differing political views. However, there have been instances of insurgents, government officials, and Taliban intimidating journalists. Journalists have been jailed for speaking out and killed by extremists.

Freedom of religion is another cause for concern. Afghanistan is on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's Watch List. Afghanistan's constitution does not explicitly guarantee individuals the right of freedom of religion, and there are few protections for Afghans to question interpretations of Islam without fear of retribution.

The government does allow a wide variety of domestic and international human rights groups to operate generally without restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. The Department of State reports that hundreds of local human rights NGOs operated independently and included groups focusing on women's rights, media freedom, and rights of disabled persons. However, the lack of security in parts of the country severely reduces the ability of NGOs to work in these areas, and militant groups and Taliban have directly targeted some NGOs.

We look forward to hearing what our witnesses have to say on these and other human rights issues, as well as their recommendations on how we might work together with the government of Afghanistan to address them.

Let me introduce our panelists today. I would also note that my statement, and the transcript from today's proceedings, will be posted on the Commission's website at [www.csce.gov](http://www.csce.gov) within 48 hours.

Dr. Sima Samar chairs the Afghanistan Human Rights Commission, which was established in 2002 to promote and protect human rights in the country and to investigate and verify cases of human rights violations. Dr. Samar served as Vice-Premier of Afghanistan in the first interim government in 2002, and later as Minister for Women's Issues for the first-ever Afghanistan Ministry of Women's Affairs. Dr. Samar has received numerous human rights awards for her work and has been on the Forbes list of top 100 most powerful women. She also serves as the UN Special Envoy to Darfur, Sudan.

Mr. Scott Worden is an adviser for the U.S. Institute of Peace's Rule of Law Program. He served as an adviser to the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan on human rights and elections issues, as well as to the Afghanistan Joint Election Management Body on the conduct of the 2005 Parliamentary elections.