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Afghan Women's Network
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+++++EMBARGO: Monday, December 5th, 2011, 11.30 a.m. CET+++++

PRESS RELEASE:

Afghan Women`s Network: “Women`s rights are not negotiable”

Delegation of ten women activists in Bonn for Afghanistan Conference / Achievements of the past ten years must be safeguarded and built upon

Bonn, December 5th, 2011. At a press conference on the day of the International Conference on Afghanistan in Bonn, ten Afghan Women Activists have voiced their serious concerns about the future of Afghan women.

“The world’s leaders are gathering in Germany to discuss the future of Afghanistan”, said Samira Hamidi, Country Director of the Afghan Women’s Network (AWN). While many issues such as withdrawal dates of troops and other matters are being discussed, Hamidi insists: “Women’s rights are not negotiable. We will not accept for our country to move back in time and take away our freedom and participation. We’ve come with our proposals on how to ensure this does not happen.”

The ten representatives of AWN are in Bonn, Germany to make recommendations to the Afghan government and the international community on how women can and must be included in a stable and democratic Afghanistan post-2014. Their voyage marks the culmination of a year of consultation and advocacy in the run-up to the Bonn Conference, through which thousands of Afghan women were consulted on reconciliation, reintegration, transition, and international engagement beyond 2014. Their message is clear: women need to be included in decision-making related to peace and security if the protection of women’s rights is to be assured. The ten women will meet with senior-level policymakers and media outlets to advance women’s specific recommendations.

Candle-lit vigils and public campaigns in the mass and social media across Europe have ramped up support for their journey, and have delighted the women. “It is inspiring, absolutely inspiring, to know that there are so many kindred spirits around the globe who support women’s rights in our country and insist they be upheld”, said Asila Wardak, the Director General of Human Rights and International Women’s Affairs at the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Policy makers have equally welcomed the women’s presence in Bonn, with many high-level meetings planned for the few short days the women will be in Europe.

Since the first Bonn Conference in 2001, Afghan women have fought tirelessly to regain the rights they’ve been denied under many years of repression and conflict. The AWN delegation is a remarkable testament to their achievements. Among them are founders and directors of civil society organizations, politicians, individual activists and journalists.

“Our demands are simple but frustratingly elusive,” said Mary Akrami, Director of the Afghan Women Skills Development Center (AWSDC). “Think of women’s rights. Include them in your planning. Mark

your achievements against them. How much more simple can this be? And yet we've struggled for years to see these very basic principles turned into practice."

The women bring with them a series of recommendations for the participants of the Bonn Conference, ranging from practical ways of including women in the transition and peace processes, to their priorities for the future of international aid, to how they feel Afghanistan can best cooperate with its neighbours.

But they also bring their fears. "So far, we've had very little assurance that the rights of Afghan women won't be sacrificed in the quest for a political settlement to the conflict. Our ability to work, to go to school, to seek justice in the courts, has not been guaranteed – not if the plans and progression of transition thus far is a measure to go by. What is peace if only 50% of the population feel secure? That is no peace at all," said Mahbouba Seraj, a women's rights activist and another member of the group.

"We've seen over and over again that when women from conflict regions have the opportunity to speak to those deciding the fates of their countries, a new path to peace is formed," said the Institute for Inclusive Security's Chief Training Officer Miki Jacevic. "It is time for Afghan women to lead us down this path."

There is also very little assurance that international aid supporting women's programming won't be the cut back as NATO troops withdraw. "Should this happen," says Jennifer Rowell, Head of Advocacy at CARE Afghanistan, an international NGO that partners with AWN, "the impressive gains Afghan women have seen over the past ten years will undoubtedly be put in jeopardy. These gains must now be written in stone and built upon".

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About AWN: AWN is a non-partisan network of women and women's NGOs working to empower Afghan women and ensure their equal participation in Afghan society. AWN seeks to enhance the effectiveness of its members by fostering partnership and collaboration, undertaking advocacy and lobbying, and building their individual capacities. Currently there are 70 NGO members and over 3,000 individual members in Afghanistan and in Pakistan.

About CARE: Founded in 1945, CARE has been working in Afghanistan since 1961. CARE is dedicated to creating education and livelihood opportunities for women and girls, ensuring women of reproductive age have access to appropriate medical care, and ensuring women's economic and social rights are respected and fulfilled. In 2011 CARE supported over 750,000 vulnerable women across the country.

About Inclusive Security: The Institute for Inclusive Security uses research, training, and advocacy to promote the inclusion of all stakeholders, particularly women, in peace processes worldwide. For more than a decade, Inclusive Security has partnered with Afghan women leaders to call for women's inclusion in all decision-making fora, including the peace process and security transition.