Taliban Increases Brutality as World Focus Turns to Ukraine

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By Shea Donovon

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More than six months after the [Taliban](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/taliban) seized Kabul, Afghanistan has largely escaped the public eye, which is now watching intently as [Vladimir Putin](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/vladimir-putin)'s invasion of Ukraine unfolds. Out of the world's watch, the Taliban has intensified its assault on the country it now controls, one that is battling a deepening humanitarian crisis and is in dire need of international support.

"This war goes far beyond Ukraine," UN Secretary-General António Guterres [said](https://www.un.org/sg/en/node/262391). "It is also an assault on the world's most vulnerable people and countries."

Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees [said](https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/unhcr-chief-asks-world-not-forget-afghanistan-during-ukraine-crisis-2022-03-15/) that while the war in Ukraine and ensuing refugee crisis is rightly the focus of global attention, the international community cannot afford to neglect Afghanistan.

The Taliban's return to power was initially viewed by the international community as a monumental security challenge, with major world powers working together to tackle the situation. But experts now fear the Taliban may see the shift in global focus as an opportunity to implement their hardline policies, [Deutsche Welle](https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-war-why-the-west-cannot-afford-to-ignore-afghanistan/a-61121939) (DW) reported, recognizing that the international community is "busy elsewhere."

When the watchful eye of the world was on them, [Human Rights Watch (HRW)](https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/22/afghanistan-taliban-threaten-revenge-killings) reported, Taliban leadership had cautioned their members to delay seeking revenge, and instead to wait and "observe those who are acting against [us], particularly those government officials and civil society activists who preach against the [Taliban]."

The Taliban is again revealing the cruelty of the de facto authority in one of the poorest countries in the world, with more than 50% of its population living below the poverty line.

"This kind of reaction has given a chance for the Taliban to increase brutality against Afghan people," Baset Hafezi, capital region director of State Ministry for Peace and an Afghan refugee now living in eastern Europe, told Newsweek.

"Right now they are searching home by home, and the life of thousands and thousands of Afghans who worked with the U.S. and [NATO](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/nato) are in huge danger," he added.

And as long as resources, attention and sympathy are being drawn away from Afghanistan, the Taliban stand to benefit.

"Another reason to fear that the Taliban will ramp up brutalities and abuses," Michael Kugelman, deputy director and senior associate for South Asia at the Wilson Center, told *Newsweek,* "is that the group can take advantage of Afghanistan's information shortage. The Taliban can carry out beatings and crackdowns that in many cases are never reported."

In Afghanistan's Helmand province, [HRW](https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/22/afghanistan-taliban-threaten-revenge-killings) reported last week that Taliban authorities have heightened surveillance and threatened to retaliate against activists and former government officials, a blatant violation of international law.

In Helmand province, [HRW](https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/22/afghanistan-taliban-threaten-revenge-killings) said, residents have reported an increase in patrols and night raids that are coinciding with warnings from Taliban leadership that mass arrests will ensue if attacks against Taliban commanders continue.

While Taliban leadership has denied that the group is engaging in revenge killings, they have a proven history of such violence.

"The Taliban are further assisted by misinformation campaigns that often present fake accounts of Taliban brutalities," Kugelman said, "meaning that when the group is presented with allegations of abuses, they can simply shrug them off as fake news, even if they are in fact true."

The Taliban takeover and U.S. departure prompted foreign news outlets to downsize their operations in Afghanistan, Kugelman said. Many Afghan journalists fled the country, and the Taliban intensified crackdowns on those who stayed.

While it has never been easy getting news from Afghanistan's rural areas, Fereshta Abbasi, Afghanistan researcher at HRW [said](https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/07/afghanistan-taliban-threatening-provincial-media), "the Taliban's repression of the media in the provinces is dangerous both for the journalists and the people whose lives are harmed by unreported abuses."

This media repression, [Foreign Policy](https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/22/afghanistan-taliban-control-arrest-journalists-women/) reported, ensures that Taliban activities, including arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial killings, go unreported.

"The world right now is more focused on Russian aggressions in Ukraine than on Taliban brutalities in Afghanistan," Kugelman said.

And even though the end of the Taliban's insurgency has reportedly led to a decrease in violence, the [United States Institute of Peace](https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/03/russias-invasion-ukraine-helps-taliban-and-makes-afghans-worse) reported that the group's authoritarian rule has left the country without the money or technical ability necessary for effective governance.

In addition to the movement of Western attention away from Afghanistan, this makes it likely that the devastating Afghan crisis will endure.

"Helping Afghanistan," the [Middle East Institute](https://www.mei.edu/publications/dangers-empowering-taliban) said, "must begin by acknowledging that the Taliban are at the heart of the problem, not the solution."

In the midst of a brutal war in Ukraine, Afghanistan is quickly descending into one of the worst humanitarian crises on the planet, [Gandhara](https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/ukraine-war-diverting-attention-afghanistan/31736163.html) reported. While international support for Ukraine remains vital, Afghanistan's needs are no less compelling.

"I fear that Afghanistan will be left in the lurch," Kugelman said, "at a moment when millions of Afghans are facing starvation."

Two months after the Taliban toppled the Afghan government, the [UNDP predicted](https://www.newsweek.com/afghanistan-expected-reach-98-percent-poverty-rate-mid-2022-un-says-1627854) the country would plunge into near-universal poverty by mid-2022. Today, Afghan children are starving to death almost daily, [HRW reported](https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/01/afghanistan-hunger-crisis-has-economic-roots), as the country struggles to tackle a rapidly deteriorating food security situation.

"The situation hasn't eased a bit in Afghanistan," Kugelman added, "even as Ukraine's has spiraled out of control."

Afghans across the country are struggling to make ends meet. International aid organizations have left, the public healthcare sector is in shambles, and under the Taliban jobs that pay a living wage are virtually nonexistent.

The escalating war in Ukraine is diverting attention away from an equally dire situation in Afghanistan, where more than half the population is in need and there is widespread malnutrition, among many other challenges, the World Health Organization Director-General said in a [statement](https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-remarks-at-united-nations-security-council-meeting-on-ukraine-17-march-2022).

And as the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan deepens, so too will the Taliban's assault on the country.

"History tells us," Shamroz Khan Masjidi, an Afghan political analyst, told [DW](https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-war-why-the-west-cannot-afford-to-ignore-afghanistan/a-61121939), "humanitarian crises could lead to violent conflicts," and Afghanistan is no exception.

"It is a sad reality that these days, the Taliban are becoming more brutal," Hafezi said, "and it is all coming while the world community is forgetting about Afghans."

A lack of international interest in the Afghanistan crisis, experts say, has dimmed the spotlight on the country, a reality the Taliban has and continues to exploit.

"When 25 years ago this country fell off the radar screen, it ended very badly," Grandi said. "We cannot go down the same road."