



August 22, 2002

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## **Physicians for Human Rights Welcomes Afghan Government's Pledge to Investigate Mass Grave but Says Afghans Lack Expertise and Resources To Do it Alone; US Response Insufficient; Urges UN to Authorize Commission of Inquiry**

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) today warned that the decision by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan to turn exclusive responsibility for the investigation of the mass grave at Dasht-e-leile to the government of Afghanistan could seriously jeopardize the investigation. The Afghan Human Rights Commission should be involved in a UN Commission of Inquiry, but does not have the expertise, capacity or necessary impartiality to lead such an investigation. Though welcoming Chairman Hamid Karzai's recent pledge to cooperate, the medical group reiterated its call for a UN Commission of Inquiry supported by the United States. PHR discovered the mass grave in January 2002 and has lobbied for the protection and investigation of the site since February.

"It is insufficient and irresponsible for the United States and the United Nations to hand over the investigation of this grave to the Afghans alone at a time when their government is struggling to obtain basic resources," said Leonard S. Rubenstein, PHR's executive director. (The chairwoman of the Afghan Human Rights Commission, Sima Samar, was quoted this week as saying while supportive of an investigation, her group was still struggling to "get an office and computers.")

"An impartial, comprehensive investigation of the site will provide the necessary physical evidence to get at the truth of how many people died and when and the cause and manner of their death. Rumors can only be dispelled if an investigation takes place," said Rubenstein, referring to a statement given yesterday by Afghan

Defense Minister General Mohammed Qasim Fahim, General Dostum's spokesman who said that the mass grave and atrocities that led to it were "a rumor." Fahim was head of all Northern Alliance forces at the time of the alleged killings.

"There are no second chances. An improper investigation is worse than none at all since it could destroy or compromise evidence forever," said Rubenstein.

PHR also affirmed the United Nation's announcement yesterday of the need for a witness protection program as an essential component of an investigation, but stated that, pursuant to an official mandate, the US and its allies should immediately deploy members of the International Security Assistance Force for Afghanistan (ISAF) to secure the Dasht-e-Leili grave and other mass grave sites and protect witnesses from reprisals.

On August 19, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) condemned the refusal of the U.S. Government, the Afghan government, and the United Nations to secure and investigate the mass grave site at Dasht-e Leili, near Sheberghan in northern Afghanistan. It demanded an immediate comprehensive criminal investigation under the auspices of a Commission of Inquiry sanctioned by the U.N. Security Council to determine the number of bodies in the grave, the circumstances of their deaths, and the likely perpetrators-all essential to begin the process of accountability.

In early 2002, PHR discovered and forensically examined the site, which revealed a recently formed mass grave in an area where witnesses said the bodies of a large number of Taliban prisoners (who surrendered at Kunduz to Northern Alliance forces in late November 2001) had been deposited and buried. In May 2002, the UN seconded two PHR forensic experts, including the director of its International Forensic Program, William Haglund, Ph.D., to undertake a preliminary investigation of the site.

For the past six months, PHR has repeatedly urged the U.S. Government and its coalition partners, the Afghan government, and the United Nations to ensure the security of both the physical site and witnesses and appealed for an official full investigation into these deaths before evidence is destroyed. It has also asked that the UN release its preliminary report. Until this week, PHR had received no official response to its appeals. This week's Newsweek investigation reinforces the urgency of PHR's appeals.

The Newsweek report included multiple eyewitness accounts alleging that Northern Alliance forces under the command of General Abdul Rashid Dostum may have killed, through suffocation in containers, as many as 2,000 to 3,000 Taliban and foreign prisoners after their surrender at Kunduz in November of last year.

While claiming to support the reconstruction of Afghanistan, the United States' and the United Nations' suppressing or ignoring evidence of possible war crimes and crimes against humanity are instead contributing greatly to Afghanistan's instability by tacitly allowing warlords to act with impunity. The lessons of post-war realities in Bosnia, Rwanda, and East Timor have demonstrated that stability cannot occur without accountability.

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