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FYI rm

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2010-07-19/kabul-conference-afghan-womens-warning-for-international-donors/?cid=hp:mainpromo7>

Secretary Clinton may be one of the highest-profile attendees at Tuesday's Kabul Conference, but Afghan women fear their opinions won't be heard—and they worry new deals with fighters will roll back their hard-fought rights.

As Hillary Clinton prepares to attend Tuesday's Kabul Conference, Afghan women are delivering a plain message to government and international officials: Women's voices should be heard.

"We have to be honest. With respect to the Kabul Conference, we have not been consulted," said Soraya Pakzad, founder of a women's shelter in the western Afghan city of Herat. Her comment came during an unusually heated question-and-answer session with Afghan Finance Minister Omar Zakhilwal and United Nations representative Staffan de Mistura marking the end of a two-day women's conference. "We want to be involved in policy-making. We don't want our presence to be purely symbolic."

"Women's rights and achievements should not be compromised in any peace negotiations or accords."

The Kabul Conference is, in part, built on symbolism. A follow-up to January's London Conference, the gathering marks the first time Afghanistan has played host to its international donors, a decision that is intended to showcase the transition from foreign to Afghan ownership of national priorities. More than 65 international delegations are expected to descend upon the Afghan capital, which is already enduring security crackdowns and traffic gridlock. Workers could be seen Sunday painting curbs and planting flowers in advance of the foreigners' arrival.

Discussions will center around five topics, including economic development, agriculture, governance, and security. The goal of the half-day event is to establish a framework for Afghan leadership in the setting—and execution—of the country's political and economic direction.

• Ann Marlowe: The Republican Fight Over Afghanistan Although it remains to be seen how quickly the

Afghan government, long under-resourced and beset by allegations of corruption, will be able to take the reins from its international donors, there is no question that Afghan ownership is the direction in which things are moving, on the political, economic, and security fronts. And that is precisely why women feel the stakes for this week's meeting are so high, particularly in light of new deals to empower local militias that might threaten women's rights.

"After the Kabul Conference, no one knows what else could be on the agenda apart from war escalations and negotiations," said Orzala Ashraf, an Afghan human rights activist. "This is very important for us, to get a serious and honest commitment from our government in the presence of all witnesses from the world that our voices will not be silenced."

Ashraf and a number of other women's advocates view Tuesday's talks as their last, best shot at speaking out about their concerns, with help from European and American officials who have been working hard to help them win a seat at the table. In another show of support, Secretary Clinton and Danish Foreign Minister Lene Espersen will meet Tuesday morning with a group of women leaders.

Regardless of this high-profile backing, many women say they have little faith in the process to produce anything aside from more paper and more unkept promises.

"Women are very tired of all these conferences; the government is going to have to show commitments," said Selay Ghaffar, an Afghan Women's Network board member. "We want things to change."

And it remains unclear how many Afghans outside Kabul, men or women, are paying attention to yet another gathering to discuss their future.

"Women in the provinces don't even know about this," said Zainab, a young math teacher from Helmand province. "I would say 60 percent of women have no idea this is going on."

Others say the presence of one or two women at the Kabul Conference isn't enough to make a difference. And they say they fear the recent move from NATO to empower local militias to fight the Taliban, particularly in southern Afghanistan.

"This is very dangerous," said Shahida Hussain, a human rights advocate from Kandahar who worked as a community organizer during the Taliban years. "We had militias during the communist years and Afghanistan was destroyed. We fear war again."

Women leaders say that they want peace and are glad to welcome back former fighters, but only if they respect women's constitutional guarantee to equal protections under the law.

"Women should be a constituent part of all bodies outlined in the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Plan," said the women in a statement at the end of their meeting. "Women's rights and achievements should not be compromised in any peace negotiations or accords."

In the meantime, women continue to fight for a voice as Tuesday approaches. After a weeklong flurry of conference calls, embassy meetings, and lunchtime gatherings, two women aside from government ministers are now slated to speak. And in a small victory for women, international officials agreed with Pakzad's assessment before pledging that women would be more involved going forward.

"I agree, you were not consulted," said da Mistura, appearing to contradict the Afghan finance minister, who only a few moments earlier had said that women's views had and would be included. "As usual, we have been paying lip service to you and we are all at fault for that."

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