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Afghan government accused of criminal acts

By Victoria Burnett in Islamabad

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Prominent members of the Afghan government and warlords supported by the US are implicated in "violent criminal offences" including robbery, extortion, rape and kidnapping, a leading human rights watchdog has said.

In a report released on Tuesday, Human Rights Watch says abuses have created a "climate of fear" that threatens to derail the debate over a new constitution and plans for elections, due to be held in June 2004.

The report underscores the need to disarm the tens of thousands of militiamen who continue to hold and abuse power in much of Afghanistan, observers in Kabul said. It also highlights the contradictions of a US-led policy that involves forging short-term alliances with warlords to hunt al-Qaeda and the Taliban while pursuing democracy.

Through evidence gathered in south-eastern Afghanistan, the report documents cases of police and army troops kidnapping civilians and holding them for ransom, breaking into households and robbing families and raping women.

The report points to Marshal Mohammad Qasim Fahim, the intractable and powerful defence minister, and Yunis Qanooni, education minister, as controlling military commanders or intelligence operatives who allegedly harass and threaten outspoken journalists or political rivals.

Marshal Fahim and Mr Qanooni are members of the Northern Alliance, which helped oust the Taliban in 2001 and was rewarded with key government posts.

A United Nations-backed programme to disarm provincial militias was due to start on July 1, but has been put on hold pending reform of the defence ministry, which is dominated by ethnic-Tajik representatives of the Northern Alliance. The international community has refused to sponsor a disarmament programme that would essentially concentrate military power in the hands of a single ethnic group.

Human Rights Watch called on foreign powers to stop undermining the government of President Hamid Karzai by supporting warlords and local strongmen.

"The United States and the United Kingdom, in particular, need to decide whether they are with President Karzai and other reformers in Kabul or with the warlords," said Brad Adams, head of the group's Asia division.

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