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IWPR

## IWPR Film Tackles Past Atrocities

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**Documentary helps some come to terms with the past, and younger audience to find out more about it.**

Afghanistan - A groundbreaking documentary produced by IWPR on war crimes and abuses committed in Afghanistan between 1978 and 2001 has debuted around the country, with audiences applauding its courageous stance.

“Forgotten Victims” covers the period from just before the 1979 Soviet invasion and ensuing occupation, through the civil war of the early 1990s, to the Taleban’s rule from 1996 to 2001. Because of its wide historical sweep, the film covers only a selection of incidents.

The documentary has been shown in the capital Kabul and in Herat, Nangarhar and Balkh provinces, with wide coverage from Afghan and international media, including this BBC Persian report.

Audiences said they were impressed that the film tackled such highly sensitive issues, especially since some of those allegedly responsible for past abuses still held positions of power.

“No one has shown such courage until now. This initiative by IWPR is the first of its kind,” said Bashir Ahmad Hanif, a broadcast manager at Kilid Radio who attended the film’s Herat launch.

Mohammad Nader Atash, a defence lawyer who watched the film with about 300 other people in Nangarhar, agreed.

“Making a film like this in the current climate requires a lot of courage,” he said. “It’s a great step towards seeking justice.”

Audiences praised “Forgotten Victims” for shining light on Afghanistan’s bloody past, and several younger viewers said they were previously unaware of the sheer scope of the violence.

Jawad, a 21-year-old Kabul resident, said that until seeing the film he had thought the worst human rights violations occurred in Kabul.

“After watching the film, I realised how extensive the crimes really were, and who the criminals are,” he said.

Mohammad Salim, a 20-year-old Kabul resident, said many younger people knew little about events between 1978 and 2001.

“The film informed me about things I knew nothing about,” he said. “It’s important to make such films and documentaries for the younger generation.”

He added that he would like to see a similar film focusing on the bloodshed over the decade since 2001.

Many of the factional leaders and warlords implicated in past cycles of violence still wield considerable power in Afghanistan.

Nazari, who works for the Tamaddon TV station – set up by Ayatollah Asef Mohseni, past leader of the mujahedin group Harakat-e Islami – said the film was one-sided, and accused its makers of failing to seek comment from those accused of past abuses. Raking up the past would only revive old animosities, he said.

IWPR country director Noorrahman Rahmani said the documentary makers had in fact made every effort to interview every individual or group mentioned in the film.

“Not only did these groups refuse to be interviewed; they also threatened the film makers,” he said.

By contrast, Rahmani, said, the relatives of victims were hoping the documentary would contribute to the process of judicial retribution.

Kabul resident Shekeb, 22, said it was difficult for individuals on their own to speak up against perpetrators, so he was pleased the filmmakers had done so.

“I’m now really optimistic that the criminals will stand trial in the court of history,” he said.

Due to recent legislation, holding actual trials may prove impossible.

In 2010, a law came quietly into force providing immunity from prosecution for those accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity in previous decades, but who have renounced violence.

Human rights activists have attacked the legislation for offering impunity to the perpetrators of major atrocities, while those who lost loved ones say they should have been consulted.

Benazir, a Kabul resident who appears in the documentary, who lost seven relatives in a single rocket attack. She told IWPR that members of parliament would not have passed the immunity law if it had been their own children who were killed.

Some viewers expressed hope that the film would help bring closure to victims.

Abdul Qader Rahimi, who heads the Herat branch of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, said the film could help heal psychological wounds, and remind victims that they were not forgotten.

Nabi Asir, a reporter for Germany’s Deutsche Welle Radio in Balkh, said the film might help younger people avoid leaders who concealed criminal intentions behind a “veil of ethnicity, language or regional origin”.

And Turalay Razaqyar, formerly information and culture chief in Balkh province, expressed hope that open discussion might foster a less violent culture,

“This film will increase the public’s rejection of war and violence. It can be regarded as an effective message of peace,” he said