

THE NATION, NOVEMBER 14, 2001

# Women in War

United Nations resolutions don't usually warrant birthday commemorations, but on October 30, women from three war-torn regions—Afghanistan, Kosovo and East Timor—honored the first anniversary of Resolution 1325, which seeks to address the particular problems faced by women in conflict zones, by testifying before the Security Council. Their stories, which were imbued with new urgency by the current crisis in Afghanistan, described a variety of abuses they and their countrywomen suffer on a daily basis. Sexual exploitation, in the form of rape, trafficking, forced prostitution and early marriage, has become as commonplace in modern conflicts as mines and sniper fire, as Haxhere Veseili, a 21-year-old from Kosovo, attested. "Thousands of children have been born of rape. I have friends who were raped," she said. "I know other girls who have relations with peacekeepers just so they can have some safety. Other young women exchange sex for money."

Women and children constitute 75 percent of war refugees. "And yet widows and single mothers in East Timor have received little or no aid," says Natercia Godinho-Adams of East Timor.

Unfortunately, even after fighting ceases, all too often such dilemmas are disregarded or swept under the rug once the ink has dried on a peace accord, prolonging instability and misery for millions. Which is why perhaps the most important component of Resolution 1325 is the call for governments and international agencies

to include women in peace negotiations and nation-building.

The progress in East Timor shows just how much difference some feminist consciousness can make. This past August, two years after East Timor ended its twenty-five-year civil war by passing a referendum to establish an independent state, the country held national elections. Women captured 27 percent of elected seats and were subsequently appointed to two of ten Cabinet positions. Moreover, the progressive East Timorese constitution contains women-friendly provisions dealing with slavery and trafficking, forced prostitution and paid maternity leave. "Not even the United States goes this far," noted Godinho-Adams.

East Timorese women not only had a role in the UN-brokered referendum, but were also very active in the transitional administration. In the two years between the referendum and national elections, local grassroots NGOs and UN agencies lobbied the political parties to run female candidates. These groups also identified women community leaders who would make strong potential candidates and provided leadership training and assistance. Now East Timor has twice the level of nationally elected female representatives as the United States, who in turn are more likely to address women's issues.

In Kosovo the situation for women is not as hopeful. In the two years since the war ended, the area has become a hotbed for sexual trafficking—a

problem that seems to be growing worse. Last year the country held municipal elections, and in spite of quotas set up to insure women's presence in government, some of the women who were elected resigned their posts to men, in part due to a lack of the kind of support or leadership training that went on in East Timor. It remains to be seen how things will change after the November 17 national elections, in which 358 of the 1,281 candidates are women.

If ever there were a time and place to invite women into the negotiating fray, it is in Afghanistan today. Now that Kabul has fallen, plans for a post-Taliban provisional government have assumed a new urgency. Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN's special representative for Afghanistan, is working to assemble a broad-based coalition that will apparently include the various tribal factions—the Pashtun, Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks—as well as the spectrum of political persuasions. In spite of their repeated requests, women, who constitute 54 percent of Afghanistan's population, have yet to be invited to the table.

Considering how women's subjugation in Afghanistan has become the political totem of the Taliban's repression, women's absence from these negotiations makes for bad symbolism—and even worse policy. Before the Taliban hid a nation full of females under house arrest and cover of the burqa, Afghan women were lawyers, judges, doctors, professors and government ministers. While the mujahedeen were off fighting the Soviet invasion in the 1980s and the civil war of the early 1990s, women were keeping the shops, the hospitals and the courts going. "Do they think that because women wear veil we do not have a voice?" Jamila, an Afghan human rights worker, asked. They may be invisible now, but those women have the experience and brainpower

that will be necessary to rebuild what is now a thoroughly decimated country. Women's participation in the peace process is not just a matter of symbolic equality; it is a matter of insuring peace and stability for all of Afghanistan.