



## **Jubilee Campaign Submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief**

### ***Regarding his Call for Input for his report on the rights of persons belonging to religious or belief minorities in situations of conflict***

## **AFGHANISTAN**

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### **I. The Overall Situation in Afghanistan Following the Taliban Takeover**

Immediately following the complete withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan in late August 2021 and the subsequent takeover of Kabul and the entire nation by the militant Islamist Taliban, the nation's populace was faced with a transition period of uncertainty. Though the Taliban's leaders initially promised peace, amnesty to "former enemies", equality for citizens, and an end to hostilities, many civilians were wary of these remarks. This is the same Taliban that seized the country in 1996 and implemented hardline Sharia law with cruel punishments – flogging, amputations, execution – and forbade women from working and receiving higher education.<sup>1</sup> A widespread fear of renewed totalitarianism with elements of terrorism imposed by the Taliban caused thousands of Afghan civilians to either shelter themselves in their homes or evacuate the country; this distress over possible reprisal was disproportionately felt by the nation's marginalized communities, including faith minorities and women.

In early September, the United Nations remarked on how the nation's newly established interim government under the ruling Taliban regrettably but unsurprisingly excluded both women and minorities, but rather included numerous individuals sanctioned by the UN Security Council for their leadership in the Taliban during its harsh rule between 1996 and 2001. Ms. Deborah Lyons, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) stated that "the lives of millions of Afghans will depend on how the Taliban choose to govern".<sup>2</sup> Within just a few days, another UN official, High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, lamented that the Taliban was already breaking its promises, with specific reference to how women were being prohibited from returning to work, girls above

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<sup>1</sup> Mujib Mashal & Richard Pérez-Peña, "[Taliban Promise Peace, but Doubt and Fear Persist](#)", *The New York Times*, 17 August 2021.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, "[Millions of Lives Will Depend on How Afghanistan's New Interim Government Chooses to Govern, Special Representative Tells Security Council](#)", Security Council 8853<sup>rd</sup> Meeting, SC/14628, 9 September 2021.

the age of 12 were forbidden from attending school, and female government workers – judges, prosecutors, police authorities, military personnel – were told to stay at home.<sup>3</sup>

Currently, Afghanistan is one of the world’s most pressing humanitarian crises.<sup>4</sup> While each and every Afghan civilian faces an extreme risk of subjugation under Taliban rule, faith minorities face an existential threat as their identities are unacceptable to the Islamist ruling power.

## II. The Situation of Christian Minorities

During the Taliban rule of the late 1990s and early 2000s, Afghan Christians were flogged, forcibly amputated, and publicly executed simply for sharing a belief outside of the ruling fundamental Sunni Islam.<sup>5</sup> At the outset of the Taliban’s second takeover this August, there was widespread terror among Christians that they would soon be transported twenty years into the past with a reinstatement of Shariah punishment. Some began receiving anonymous menacing phone calls in which they were warned “we are coming for you” and letters in their doorways threatening interrogation and prosecution if they did not turn themselves in for being Christians.<sup>6</sup> Less than a month later, in mid-September, the Taliban re-established the Ministry for Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, whose “main purpose is to serve Islam” by punishing “sins” – such as extramarital sexual intercourse, disobeying prayer times, refusing to grow beards, listening to prohibited music – with flogging, amputation, and execution. As conversion to Christianity is seen as a crime of apostasy according to Sharia, Christians are worried that they will be one of the primary targets of these sinister punishments.<sup>7</sup> Frontier Alliance International (FAI), who has contacts with an underground church on the ground in Afghanistan, stated that the Taliban has been curating a kill-list of Christian converts, and that in some locations they have gone from house to house in attempts to identify those on the list; similarly, they are searching civilians’ mobile devices for Bible applications and other “Christian messaging”.<sup>8</sup> In one incident, a Muslim extremist threatened to kidnap the daughters of a Christian man and forcibly marry them off to Taliban militants; in another, a Christian man received a letter from the Taliban claiming that his house was now their property.<sup>9</sup> As a result of the increasingly prevalent danger of identifying as a Christian in Afghanistan, many are keeping their faith in secrecy from their family members – their “first enemy” – so that their relatives do not report them to authorities; in spite of the dangers, however, many Christians continue to worship in clandestine house churches.<sup>10</sup>

## III. The Situation of Muslim Minorities

### A. Hazara and Shi’a/Shi’ite Muslims

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*; Mychael Schnell, [“UN says Taliban breaking promises”](#), *The Hill*, 13 September 2021.

<sup>4</sup> International Rescue Committee (IRC), *Afghanistan*.

<sup>5</sup> David Treyster, [“The Taliban May No Longer Control Afghanistan, but Their Persecution of Religious Minorities Will Forever Remain a Stain on Global History”](#), New York Law School, 2002

<sup>6</sup> International Christian Concern, [“Christians in Afghanistan Call for Help as New Reports of Persecution Surface”](#), 23 August 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Hollie McKay, [“Taliban bring back ‘virtue’ ministry, stoning and amputations for ‘major sins’”](#), *New York Post*, 13 September 2021. ; Anugrah Kumar, [“Christians living in fear as Taliban carries out executions, amputations as punishments”](#), *The Christian Post*, 25 September 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Standing for Freedom Center, [“Reports: Taliban is finding and killing Christians in Afghanistan using hit lists and by checking phones for Bible apps”](#), 20 August 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Anugrah Kumar, [“Christians living in fear as Taliban carries out executions, amputations as punishments”](#), *The Christian Post*, 25 September 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Rock Ronald Rozario, [“Dangers multiply for Afghan Christians under Taliban rule”](#), *Union of Catholic Asian News*, 8 September 2021.

Hazaras, one of Afghanistan's largest ethnic groups, predominantly identify as Shi'a Muslims and have a bloody history of being ruthlessly targeted for attacks by the Taliban and Islamic State. In the late 1800s and early 1990s under the leadership of Pashtun ruler Abdur Rahman Khan, hundreds of thousands of Hazaras were massacred and enslaved, with their homes looted and their community depleting by sixty percent as a result of the atrocities. Throughout the 1900s, following the withdrawal of Soviet personnel in 1989, and during the rule of the radical Sunni Taliban in the 1990s Hazaras have faced systemic discrimination in discrimination and employment and have been disappeared, expelled, and killed for their identity as ethno-religious minorities.<sup>11</sup> As Hazaras have experienced persecution even during the presence of American troops over the past twenty years, their plight is only likely to worsen now that the Taliban can commit crimes unchecked. In July and August, while the Taliban was securing control over Ghazni<sup>12</sup> and Daykundi<sup>13</sup> provinces, they had killed and tortured at least 20 Hazaras – including one teenage girl shot to death – and mass evicted thousands of others from their homes. Taliban troops broke individuals' limbs one by one, strangled them with scarves, bound their arms and legs, and pulled their hair out, all before shooting them dead. In late August 2021, Taliban troops desecrated the statue of Hazara leader Abdul Ali Mazari in Bamiyan, the same individual they executed in 1995.<sup>14</sup>

Shi'a Muslims not from the Hazara ethnic group have similarly been targeted for their faith since the Taliban takeover. On 8 October, the Islamic State launched a suicide bomb in a Shiite mosque in Kunduz province which killed at least 72 worshippers and injured 140 during prayer. A provincial Taliban officer has claimed that "the Taliban are prepared to ensure their [Shi'ites] safety", but these reassurances have been taken with a grain of salt considering the group's historical persecution of Shi'a.<sup>15</sup> Only a week following this attack, another suicide bombing at the Fatimiya Shiite mosque in Kandahar had killed at least 63 and wounded dozens more; the attack took place during prayers which drew some 500 worshippers.<sup>16</sup> By late October, Human Rights Watch declared that Islamic State's violent activity against Shi'a Muslims meets the threshold for crimes against humanity.<sup>17</sup> In mid-November, the Taliban intelligence outfit requested that teachers in Herat province fill out forms identifying their religion - specifically whether they follow Sunni or Shia Islam - as well as other personal details such as home address and contact details; the Taliban's Chief of Cultural Affairs Naeem ul-Haq Haqqani has refused to elaborate on why such information was requested, and Shia individuals in Herat province are worried that they will be targeted for religious persecution.<sup>18</sup>

#### IV. The Situation of Hindu and Sikh Minorities

The population of Hindus and Sikhs in Afghanistan has decreased over the past twenty-some years; the largest exodus had occurred in 1996 as the Taliban began to consolidate power and take over the entire country. Those that refrained from fleeing the nation were forced to wear yellow tags which identified them as faith minorities and singled them out to pay taxes imposed by the Taliban specifically on non-Muslim civilians. The small yet robust population of Hindus and Sikhs in Afghanistan have been the targets of a few notable terrorist attacks by the Islamic State (IS) in

<sup>11</sup> Sitarah Mohammadi & Sijad Askary, "[Why the Hazara people fear genocide in Afghanistan](#)", *Al Jazeera*, 27 October 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Amnesty International, "[Afghanistan: Taliban responsible for brutal massacre of Hazara men – new investigation](#)", 19 August 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Amnesty International, "[Afghanistan: 13 Hazara killed by Taliban fighters in Daykundi province – new investigation](#)", 5 October 2021.; Shereena Qazi, "[Why are Hazaras being evicted from their homes in Afghanistan/s Daikundi?](#)", *TRT World*, 29 September 2021.

<sup>14</sup> India Today, "[Taliban blow up Hazara leader Abdul Ali Mazari's statue in Bamiyan](#)", 18 August 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Scott Neuman & John Ruwitch, "[Dozens of people have been killed in a mosque explosion in Afghanistan](#)", *NPR*, 8 October 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Scott Neuman, "[Suicide bombers kill nearly 50 at a Shiite mosque in Afghanistan](#)", *NPR*, 15 October 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Human Rights Watch, "[Afghanistan: Surge in Islamic State Attacks on Shia](#)", 25 October 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Kabul Now, "[Taliban orders school teachers to specify their religious identity](#)", 16 November 2021.

Jalalabad in 2018 and nearby Gurdwara Har Rai Sahib Sikh temple in 2020, and they are “subject to harassment, physical assaults, abduction, land grabbing, looting, and pressure to convert”.<sup>19</sup> Fortunately, the vast majority of Hindus and Sikhs evacuated Afghanistan in the days preceding and following the Taliban’s 2021 takeover; only some 250 remain. Approximately 140 of these Hindus and Sikhs, however, are not remaining in Afghanistan by choice; they had traveled from their shelter at Gurdwara Dashmesh Pita Sikh temple on 26 August to the Kabul airport only to be restricted from entering the grounds following an earlier suicide bombing.<sup>20</sup> Days earlier, 72 Sikhs and Hindus were stopped by Taliban militants as they were trying to board a flight evacuating civilians; they were told they could not leave as they are citizens of Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup> In early October 2021, a group of unidentified armed men ambushed and occupied a Sikh temple in the Kart-e Parwan district of Kabul, where they tied up guards and broke security cameras before exiting later.<sup>22</sup> In late November 2021, a large explosion was set off near a Gurdwara in the aforementioned Kart-e Parwan district where some 70 to 90 Sikhs and Hindus are sheltering; Afghan authorities sealed off the temple and those inside are prohibited from exiting.<sup>23</sup> Taliban authorities earlier in the month announced that Hindus and Sikhs would finally be permitted to exit the country with their old passports; ironically, a sizeable portion of Hindus and Sikhs who wish to leave Afghanistan are the aforementioned ones that are relegated to their Gurdwara following the 26 November explosion; they have been preparing their passports and waiting to receive their emergency e-visas.<sup>24</sup>

## V. Conclusion & Recommendations

Jubilee Campaign urges members and observer states of the Human Rights Council to call upon the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan – currently under control of the Taliban – to:

1. Increase funding for transfer of supplies to Afghan civilian-led civil society organizations and NGOs operating on the ground in Afghanistan to provide food supplies, medical supplies and care, temporary schooling, salaries for “public sector workers”, COVID-19 and other vaccinations and immunizations, and more to Afghan society.<sup>25</sup>
2. Maintain necessary sanctions against the Taliban and withholdings of recognitions of Taliban legitimacy – with the stipulation that humanitarian “carve outs” are developed so that aid can be delivered to civilians despite sanctions – but prepare to engage in diplomatic relations with the Taliban, as negotiation stages may be the only leverageable arenas to raise human rights concerns with, influence the actions of, and obtain concessions from the Taliban via soft power. As explained by EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, “It’s not a matter of official recognition. It’s a matter of dealing with [the Taliban]”.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Niala Mohammad & Zack Udin, [Afghanistan Factsheet](#), United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), October 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Seerat Chabba, [“Afghanistan: What does Taliban rule mean for Sikhs and Hindus?”](#), DW News, 8 September 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Divya Goyal, [“Taliban stop 72 Afghan Sikhs, Hindus headed to India: You are Afghans, so can’t leave”](#), *The Indian Express*, 22 August 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Gandhara, [“Kabul Sikhs Fear For Safety After Armed Men Attack Temple”](#), 6 October 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Yudhvir Rana, [“Blast near Kart-e-Parwan gurdwara in Kabul”](#), *The Times of India*, 26 November 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Yudhvir Rana, [“Afghan Sikhs, Hindus can fly out on old passports”](#), *The Times of India*, 4 November 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, [“The international community must ensure the immediate flow of aid and supplies to Afghanistan”](#), 6 October 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Jacob Kurtzer, [“Taliban Takeover: Humanitarian Implications and Recommendations for the United States”](#), *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 24 August 2021.

Tracey Shelton, [“The Taliban wants to be recognized by the world. Should Western countries engage with it?”](#), *ABC News Australia*, 26 August 2021.

3. As recommended by a delegation of Afghan women leaders – rights activists, researchers, lawyers, journalists, parliamentarians, etc. – during meetings at the United Nations, “create spaces for [us] and other Afghan women leaders to talk directly with the Taliban .... Give us a seat at the table.” Along that same vein, create space for faith minority leaders and leaders of other marginalized communities in Afghanistan to engage in peace efforts and express their concerns about religious persecution under Taliban rule. Such would be a necessary first step towards “ensur[ing] that the de facto authorities in Kabul develop an inclusive and fully representative governance body that [reflects] the diversity of Afghan society”.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> UN Women, [“Afghan women leaders speak at the UN: ‘Give us a seat at the table.’”](#), 25 October 2021.