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Afghanistan

Response to Information Request Number:	AFG03001.OGC
Date:	April 04, 2003
Subject:	Afghanistan: Information on Situation of Hazaras in Post-Taliban Afghanistan
From:	BCIS Resource Information Center
Keywords:	Afghanistan / Armed conflicts / Armed resistance movements / Civil society / Civil wars / Combatants / Discrimination based on ethnic origin / Ethnic minorities / Freedom of religion / Fundamentalism / Political institutions / Political opposition / Political representation / Political repression / Political situation / Religious conflicts / Religious movements / Religious minorities / Rule of law / Vulnerable groups

Query:

What is the current situation of Hazaras who had actively opposed the Taliban regime?

What is the current level of political participation of various ethnic groups, including Hazaras?

Are the Taliban still present and active in Afghanistan today? If so, in what capacity?

Could an individual Hazara safely relocate within Afghanistan if this person faced persecution by the Taliban?

Response:

SUMMARY

According to sources consulted by the Resource Information Center, conditions for Afghanistan's ethnic Hazara minority have improved significantly since a U.S.-led coalition ousted the Taliban regime in late 2001. Hazaras as a group no longer face overt persecution or discrimination, and they are fairly well represented in President Hamid Karzai's transitional administration.

Relocation of Hazaras within Afghanistan could be hampered by the general lawlessness and factional fighting that plague parts of the country outside of Kabul. Moreover, Hazaras reportedly face unofficial discrimination in Pashtun-majority areas of southern Afghanistan.

CURRENT SITUATION OF HAZARAS WHO ACTIVELY OPPOSED THE TALIBAN

Since the fall of the Taliban regime, ethnic Hazaras, most of whom are Shi'ite, apparently have faced little persecution from remnants of the militant group, although the Resource Information Center was unable to find specific information about the condition of Hazaras who actively opposed the Taliban.

An Afghanistan researcher with Amnesty International said that her organization had not received reports of

Hazaras being targeted by Taliban remnants (Researcher 19 Mar 2003).

Given that security is fragile in much of Afghanistan, it is possible that individual Hazaras could be harassed by Taliban members, yet it is unlikely that Hazaras as a group are being targeted, according to the Dean of International Studies and Programs at the University of Nebraska at Omaha who is a longtime Afghanistan observer (Dean 3 Apr 2003). This is particularly true for those living in the traditional Hazara stronghold in mountainous central Afghanistan, known as Hazarajat, and in Kabul, where many Hazaras work (Dean 3 Apr 2003).

Nevertheless, reports emerged in late 2002 of harassment of Hazaras by Taliban allies in a remote part of central Afghanistan, though U.S.-led forces have since taken control of the region. The UNHCR said in a November 2002 report that it had received reports of intimidation of Hazara refugees who were returning to the Tajik-dominated Kahmard region, located in central Bamian Province (Reuters 2 Nov 2002).

U.S. and Afghan troops in March 2003 took control of the Kahmard region amid reports that Taliban sympathizers were sheltering in the area. Populated in part by ethnic Tajiks and Tatars who had helped the Taliban during its occupation of Bamian between 1999 and 2001, Kahmard had been the only Bamian district not controlled by the Hazara-based Hezb-i-Wahdat group after the Taliban's ouster (AFP 10 Mar 2003).

Under the Taliban, Hazaras faced "particularly severe" repression that included a series of mass killings in northern Afghanistan at the hands of Taliban fighters, according to the U.S. State Department's global human rights report for 2002 (U.S. DOS 31 Mar 2003). The Hazaras were part of the Northern Alliance forces that opposed the Taliban and that took power after the Taliban's downfall (U.S. DOS 31 Mar 2003).

CURRENT LEVEL OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF AFGHANISTAN'S ETHNIC GROUPS, PARTICULARLY HAZARAS

In an effort to bridge longstanding ethnic divides, President Hamid Karzai's cabinet includes representatives of all of Afghanistan's main ethnic groups, though minority Tajiks hold most key portfolios, including defense. Karzai himself belongs to the Pashtun ethnic group, Afghanistan's largest. Pashtuns make up around 40 percent of the population, and most Taliban members are Pashtun. The 28 cabinet ministers named by Karzai following his June 2002 election by a traditional tribal assembly included 13 Pashtuns, 7 Tajiks, 3 Uzbeks, 2 Hazaras, 2 non-Hazara Shi'ites, and 1 Turkmen. Vice President Karim Khalili, leader of the Hezb-i-Wahdat, is a Hazara (Moniz 8 Jul 2002).

While the powerful defense portfolio is held by Mohammad Fahim, an ethnic Tajik and former Northern Alliance military leader, a February 2003 reshuffle brought Hazaras, as well as Pashtuns and Uzbeks, into several key defense offices formerly held by Tajiks (AFP 20 Feb 2003).

Outside Karzai's cabinet, Sima Samar, a Hazara, chairs Afghanistan's Human Rights Commission (U.S. DOS 31 Mar 2003). Hazaras are also represented in Afghanistan's new national army, which is being trained by U.S. and French troops (Baldauf 11 Feb 2003).

In addition to the strong Hazara presence in the Hazarajat region, many Hazaras live in Kabul and in and around the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif (U.S. DOS 7 Oct 2002). Hazaras and other Shi'a tend to be among the most economically disadvantaged Afghans (U.S. DOS 31 Mar 2003).

ARE THE TALIBAN STILL PRESENT AND ACTIVE IN AFGHANISTAN TODAY AND, IF SO, IN WHAT CAPACITY?

Since the Taliban's ouster in late 2001, remnants of the regime have sheltered in remote reaches of Afghanistan's mountains, mainly in the south. While they stand little chance of retaking power while the U.S.-led coalition remains in Afghanistan, rogue Taliban members appear to be regrouping (Gannon 3 Apr 2003).

"Evidence is mounting in the southern regions of Afghanistan that the Taliban is reorganizing and has found an ally in rebel commander Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, labeled a terrorist and hunted by U.S. troops," the Associated Press reported in early April (Gannon 3 Apr 2003). The article pointed to the discovery by coalition forces of

around 60 Taliban fighters holed up near the village of Sikai Lashki, 25 miles north of the southeastern village of Spinboldak. It also cited the recent killings in southern Afghanistan of a Red Cross worker and, separately, of two U.S. troops in an ambush, as well as allegations that Taliban leaders have found safe havens in private homes in neighboring Pakistan's Quetta province (Gannon 3 Apr 2003).

While no reliable estimates exist of the number of Taliban fighters in southern Afghanistan, the Associated Press said in late March that it is believed that "many" Taliban are holed up in the southern mountains (Khan 29 Mar 2003).

COULD AN INDIVIDUAL HAZARA SAFELY RELOCATE WITHIN AFGHANISTAN IF THIS PERSON FACED PERSECUTION BY THE TALIBAN?

While there is little evidence of overt persecution against Hazaras in post-Taliban Afghanistan, Hazaras could have trouble relocating to Pashtun-majority areas of the south, where they reportedly face some discrimination. Outside Kabul, moreover, freedom of travel for all Afghans is limited by the fragile security situation.

Hazaras "still face discrimination in southern Afghanistan, including Khandahar, and in eastern Afghanistan, including Paktia and Khost provinces," according to a Kabul-based program officer for the International Human Rights Law Group in Washington, D.C. (Program Officer 4 Apr 2003).

Beyond Kabul, meanwhile, there has been "continued lawlessness and sporadic fighting in northern areas," and "instability in the southeast, where Taliban and al-Qa'ida remnants remained at large and where local warlord Pacha Khan Zadran openly attacked forces loyal to the central Government," according to the 2003 U.S. State Department report on human rights in Afghanistan (U.S. DOS 31 Mar 2003).

While a multinational force has helped keep the peace in Kabul and surrounding areas, contributing countries have declined to extend the force's mandate to other parts of the country. "Remnants of the Taliban and rogue warlords sometimes threatened, robbed, attacked, and occasionally killed local villagers, political opponents, and prisoners," the State Department report said (U.S. DOS 31 Mar 2003). The report noted that the fragile security situation has hampered the delivery of humanitarian aid to certain areas, though it added that the primary barrier to delivering assistance is logistical (U.S. DOS 31 Mar 2003).

Similarly, a March 2003 Amnesty International report said that there was a "continuing lack of security" in much of Afghanistan. "Factional fighting continues between rival power holders and crime levels are high" outside Kabul, the report said (AI 12 Mar 2003).

Meanwhile, a December 2002 Human Rights Watch report said that much of Afghanistan is plagued by "poor security, generalized criminality, and limited regard for basic human rights" (HRW 5 Dec 2002). And a January 2003 report by the UN special representative to Afghanistan for human rights, Kamal Hossain of Bangladesh, said that "insecurity and lawlessness" plagues much of the country (UNCHR 13 Jan 2003).

Moreover, the powerful warlords who control swathes of territory in the countryside while nominally supporting the central Government in Kabul face few checks on their authority. "In practice, recognition of the rule of law, particularly outside of Kabul, was limited," according to the U.S. State Department (U.S. DOS 31 Mar 2003).

Overall, the "ability to travel within the country was hampered by sporadic fighting, brigandage, landmines, a road network in a state of disrepair, and limited domestic air service" (U.S. DOS 31 Mar 2003). Nevertheless, "many men continued to travel relatively freely, with buses using routes in most parts of the country" (U.S. DOS 31 Mar 2003).

Sporadic fighting and the severe drought that has afflicted parts of Afghanistan in recent years have discouraged some Afghan refugees from returning to the country (U.S. DOS 31 Mar 2003). Nevertheless, more than 1.6 million Afghans returned from Pakistan in 2002 under the auspices of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and just over 400,000 have returned from Iran since the Taliban's overthrow, UNHCR spokesperson Kris Janowski said at a March 2003 press briefing in Geneva (UNHCR 11 Mar 2003).

While the fighting in southern Afghanistan has mainly involved remnants of the former regime and its al-Qa'ida

allies, the fighting in the north has involved rival commanders from three ethnic-based parties that helped drive the Taliban from power: the predominantly Tajik Jamiat-e Islami, the Hazara-based Hezb-i-Wahdat, and the mainly Uzbek Jonbesh-e Melli Islami (AI 1 Jan 2003).

Skirmishes have also broken out in western Heart Province between forces loyal to provincial leader Ismail Khan and those of Pashtun commander Amanullah Kahn (U.S. DOS 31 Mar 2003).

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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