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Afghanistan: Recruitment by illegal armed groups and other non-state actors for voluntary or forced service and labour (2004 - 2006)

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Various sources in 2005 reported on the recruitment practices of illegal armed groups in Afghanistan. In its December 2005 publication on Afghanistan, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) indicates that forced recruitment was taking place in the northern regions and central highlands of the country (NRC 2 Dec. 2005, 25, 72). The IDMC notes an increase in recruitment activities (*ibid.*, 26), and points out that the failure of protection in the north is largely due to the presence of armed group commanders who engage in hostilities and who exercise almost total control over the civilian population (*ibid.*, 148). The IDMC explains that these competing military factions engage in forcible recruitment, and that these activities affect the local population, and internally displaced persons seeking protection in northern Afghanistan, as well as recent returnees to the region (*ibid.*, 71-72, 148).

In Jawzan, a province bordering Turkmenistan, an official at the Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation indicated that two opposing armed factions - Jamiat-e Islami and Jonbesh-e Melli Islami - have engaged in forcible recruitment campaigns resulting in at least 2,000 families having to leave Afghanistan (NRC 2 Dec. 2005, 72). On the border of Tajikistan, Jamiat-e Islami forces based in Kunduz province and operating under the leadership of Commander Daoud reportedly recruited persons by force in neighboring Takhar province (*ibid.*, 27). In a 2004 report, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) cites power struggles between armed groups in Faryab province, on the border of Turkmenistan, as the cause of forced recruitment campaigns, particularly in the Almar district of that province (IOM Jan. 2004, 51).

The IDMC highlights that persons of Pashto ethnicity were generally vulnerable to forced recruitment in the north, but does not provide specific examples of instances when this might have occurred (*ibid.*, 26). A council of Pashtun internally displaced persons (IDPs) expressed to the IDMC that they were reluctant to return home following a 2001 exodus from the region, citing their fear of warlords who engage in forcible enlistment and forced labour campaigns (*ibid.*, 26, 146).

### Recruitment for service with illegal armed groups

In its 2005 National Development Strategy, the government of Afghanistan

describes the socioeconomic conditions that it believes fuels recruitment into armed groups:

Fifty-seven percent of the population is under 18 years of age, but has little hope of employment; in much of the country, over 80% of the people are illiterate; average life expectancy is 46 years; recruitment of fighters is incredibly cheap; and some families still send their sons to join armed groups in return for the guarantee that they will be fed (Afghanistan 19 Dec. 2005, 45).

The IOM explains that while some recruitment by non-state agents in Afghanistan is voluntary, there is concern about recruitment efforts that use intimidation, violence, and coercion to obtain recruits who are then forced to serve in armed factions (Jan. 2004, 51). Extortion practices, which include taxation, are used against families who refuse to hand relatives over to factional leaders (IOM Jan. 2004, 51, 52; NRC 2 Dec. 2005, 25). Estimates of the amounts extorted from families to avoid recruitment range from CAD 28 to CAD 498 (ibid., 25-26; IOM Jan. 2004, 52). The IOM indicates that "Pashtuns are beaten and taxed doubly - taxes to support the armed groups and taxes to avoid young men from being taken" (ibid.).

The IDMC explains that in some cases, families are forced to sell their homes to raise the funds to buy their sons out of recruitment attempts (NRC 2 Dec. 2005, 2). In other cases, communities assist families in making the demanded payment (ibid., 26, 72). Where families cannot raise the funds, relatives are in some cases assaulted by recruiters and taken by force (ibid.). Families also send their sons to neighbouring countries to escape recruitment (ibid., 72). In one camp for internally displaced persons located in Samangan province, residents conspired to smuggle most of the young men to another camp to avoid forcible recruitment (ibid., 26). Individuals and families experiencing forced recruitment do not generally report the incidents to law enforcement authorities as these authorities are widely perceived to be controlled by armed groups (IOM Jan. 2004, 52).

### **Recruitment of women, girls and boys**

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers reports that boys voluntarily joined or were forcibly recruited into militias (Coalition to Stop 2005). The Coalition places the number of current and former child soldiers in Afghanistan at approximately 8,000 (ibid.), The IOM estimates the average age of recruits enlisted for fighting is 16 years (Jan. 2004, 52).

The IOM reports that women, as well as girls and boys as young as four years old, have been abducted by members of armed groups, held against their will for varying amounts of time, and subjected to rape by one or more people (Jan. 2004, 36, 37). According to the IOM, there is a trend among armed factions to sexually abuse boys (IOM Jan. 2004, 36, 37). Generally, local commanders recruit boys to attend wedding parties and dance for their entertainment (ibid.; UN 26 July 2005), after which they are sometimes raped and enslaved (IOM Jan. 2004, 37). In a July 2005 article, the United Nations (UN) Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) indicated that the sexual exploitation of children by warlords continued in rural parts of north, northeast and central Afghanistan.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women indicates that families and

traditional justice mechanisms are powerless in the face of what she describes as "unbridled despotic violence" against women (UN 15 Feb. 2006, para. 55). According to the Special Rapporteur, this violence is perpetrated by warlords and their fighters, and includes forced marriages, kidnappings, and rape (ibid., para. 55, 21). Recording events in 2004, the IOM and the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers indicated that local commanders forced girls into early marriage and into performing domestic service under their command (IOM Jan. 2004, 32; Coalition to Stop 2005). Armed groups kidnapped women and girls from their homes for forced marriage and slavery, in the process assaulting and sometimes killing relatives who attempt to thwart them (IOM Jan 2004, 32, 33). Due to the power and political authority that armed groups wield in their territory, very few cases were reported to the police (IOM Jan. 2004, 32).

### **Forced labour**

A 2004 report by the IOM indicates that Afghans were being trafficked to Pakistan for the purpose of forced labour, although it does not identify which groups were responsible for these activities (Jan. 2004, 55, 40, 45). Adults and children were trafficked from Afghanistan to Pakistan to work in debt bondage, notably from northern Jawzjan and Sar-I Pul provinces (IOM Jan. 2004, 40). In Pakistan, an unspecified number of Afghan children living in Shamshatoo refugee camp were recruited and taken to Pakistan's Punjab province, where they were forced to perform hard labour (ibid., 45).

Other forms of forced labour are tied to Afghanistan's poppy cultivation and drug-smuggling operations (IOM Jan. 2004, 52; see also Denmark Nov. 2004, 61). These operations are often coordinated by drug lords and regional commanders, many of whom hold government positions (*The Christian Science Monitor* 13 May 2005). The IOM reports that illegal armed groups recruit and enslave men to harvest opium poppy fields (Jan. 2004, 52; see also Denmark Nov. 2004, 61). According to the IOM, regional commanders "intimidate" villagers into providing labourers to harvest the poppy crop, and "coerce" both boys and men to perform the work (IOM Jan. 2004, 52-53). Complaints of forced labour came from northern Afghanistan, and Afghans of Turkmeni descent were allegedly the preferred men to harvest poppies because they were perceived to be skilled at it (ibid.). The poppy harvesting season in Afghanistan stretched between May and July, depending on the region, and labourers were reportedly forced to harvest the crops for approximately two weeks before being released (ibid.).

According to the 2004 IOM report, Afghan children were reportedly kidnapped and killed for the purpose of drug smuggling, a practice that occurred more frequently under the Taliban, but that reportedly persisted at the time of the report's publication (Jan. 2004, 53). The IOM also reported that individuals of unspecified age had been forced, under threat of violence, to transport drugs to neighbouring countries by swallowing them or inserting them into orifices (IOM Jan. 2004, 53). Information on forced drug smuggling could not be corroborated by the Research Directorate within time constraints.

### **Recruitment activities conducted by the Taliban**

Media and human rights sources indicate that the Taliban are operating across southern Afghanistan, near the border with Pakistan (AFP 4 June 2006; AI 14 Nov. 2003, 21), including in Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul and Uruzgan provinces (BBC 2 June 2006). The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reports that significant Taliban and

al-Qaeda activity is taking place in Afghanistan's eastern provinces, bordering Pakistan (ibid.; see also AI 14 Nov. 2003, 21), and they reportedly recruit residents by distributing DVDs (BBC 25 Apr. 2006). In addition, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) indicates that new Taliban activity is taking place in northern Afghanistan's Balkh, Jowzjan, Sar-e-Pul, and Badakhshan provinces (15 June 2006, 5).

Recruitment activity conducted by the Taliban includes preaching at mosques (AFP 4 June 2006; IWPR 15 June 2006, 4) and prayer gatherings (ibid.). As well, according to a commander of the coalition forces in Afghanistan, younger fighters, including boys between the ages of 14 and 16, are recruited when the Taliban forces are depleted, as was the case in July and August 2005 (UN 26 July 2005; AP 23 Aug. 2005). According to *Cheragh*, a Kabul-based newspaper, the Taliban recruits citizens and demobilized members of the AMF who are discontented with the government (23 Oct. 2005). Recruits also reportedly join because they have few other means to stay alive (IWPR 15 June 2006, 4). Following their overthrow in 2001, the Taliban built training camps in northwest Pakistan, where the BBC reports that they actively recruit new members from religious schools (*madrassas*) and Afghan refugee camps (BBC 2 June 2006, 3).

The meaning of *talib*, a member of the Taliban, is "someone who seeks religious knowledge" (REF/RL 22 Feb. 2006). The IOM report described a trend of forced religious studies, particularly for boys, in Afghanistan, and although no time period was specified, these activities appeared to be ongoing (Jan. 2004, 53-54). According to the IOM report, recruiters targeted youth who were poor, impressionable and still dependent on their families for religious training in the unregulated madrassa religious school system (IOM Jan. 2004, 53-54). Citing unconfirmed accounts, the IOM reported in 2004 that the Taliban recruited boys for religious education in Pakistan (Jan. 2004, 54) and, according to Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (REF/RL), Afghan children attend religious schools in Pakistan, which serve as recruiting centres for the Taliban (22 Feb. 2006; IOM Jan. 2004, 54). The IOM document cites reports that, in some cases, sexual abuse of young Afghan boys took place at Taliban-affiliated religious schools in Pakistan (IOM Jan. 2004, 54).

In August 2005, the Associated Press reported that in eastern Paktika province on the border of Pakistan, the Taliban were in a "desperate drive" to find recruits in the run-up to national elections and were "emptying" madrassas of their students (23 Aug. 2005). In early 2006, RFE/RL reported that the Taliban were systematically burning down state-run schools in order to discourage the ideas that they spread, and to coerce parents into sending their children to madrassa schools in Pakistan for religious study (22 Feb. 2006). According to RFE/RL, approximately 12 schools, including some in southern Helmand province, had been torched in several months prior to February 2006 (22 Feb. 2006).

### **Recruitment activities of al-Qaeda**

Information on recruitment activities conducted by al-Qaeda in Afghanistan was scarce among sources consulted by the Research Directorate. In December 2005, however, a *Newsweek* article indicated that al-Qaeda's operations in Afghanistan were in need of more recruits (4 Dec. 2005). The *Newsweek* article also notes women's increased participation in al-Qaeda as suicide bombers, which it attributes to the organization's lack of recruits in Afghanistan and other countries (ibid.). Some widows and family members of deceased al-Qaeda operatives reportedly participate out of vengeance for their relative's death, or in support of their relative's cause (ibid.).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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**Oral Sources:** The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), the Kabul office of the International Organization of Migration (IOM), and two independent experts on Afghanistan did not provide information within time constraints.

**Internet sites, including:** United Nations (UN) Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA); UN World Food Programme (WFP), Watch List on Children and Conflict, War Resisters International

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