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Afghanistan: Situation and treatment of the Hazara people (June 2010-June 2011)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

At just nine percent, or approximately 2.7 million of Afghanistan's estimated population of 29,835,392 people (US 8 July 2011), the Hazaras are a minority ethnic group (AFP 13 Aug. 2010; MAR 31 Dec. 2006). And with eighty percent of the Afghan population Sunni Muslim (US 8 July 2011), the Hazaras, who are largely Shiite Muslim (MRG n.d.; US 3 June 2011, 7), also form part of a minority religious group (MAR 31 Dec. 2006).

Situation of the Hazaras

Since the end of the "almost exclusively Pashtun" Taliban regime (*The Christian Science Monitor* 24 Nov. 2010), the situation of the Hazaras in Afghanistan has improved (MAR 31 Dec. 2006; *LA Times* 16 Dec. 2010; US May 2011, 215; Professor 12 May 2011). Many of the Hazaras who sought refuge in Pakistan and Iran returned to settle in Kabul after the Taliban was ousted in 2001 (*The New York Times* 4 Jan. 2010; *LA Times* 16 Dec. 2010). According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the "new perspectives and opportunities" gained from their sojourn abroad has helped the Hazaras "adapt to the transformed country" by providing them with "new skills and values" (16 Dec. 2010).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that the Afghan government has made "significant" efforts to address "historical ethnic tensions" (UN 17 Dec. 2010, 31). As example, the UN organization describes what it sees as a "positive development" (ibid., 31 note 221): that Hazaras can now celebrate Shiite religious holidays openly (*LA Times* 16 Dec. 2010; US May 2011, 215), something they could not do while the Taliban was in power (ibid. 14 Sept. 2010, 24). In addition, a Washington University anthropology professor, who has published on the Hazaras, told the Research Directorate in correspondence that some "enterprising and educated" Hazaras are also taking on "responsible positions in government" (Professor 12 May 2011). The United States (US) Commission on Religious Freedom similarly reports that the Hazaras "participate fully in public life, including in parliament and in senior positions in the Karzai government" (US May 2011, 218). In the September 2010 elections, for example, the Hazaras won 59 of 249 parliamentary seats in the lower house (ibid.; *LA Times* 16 Dec. 2010), almost "double their actual proportion of the population" (*The Christian Science Monitor* 24 Nov. 2010).

However, according to the US Congressional Research Service, the Hazaras' "increased political strength has caused ethnic tensions with the Pashtuns" (US 5 May 2011, 22). The September 2010 elections saw a "disproportionately large number of Hazara representatives elected, especially compared to Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan" (*The Christian*

Science Monitor 24 Nov. 2010). The Congressional Research Service reports that "many" Pashtuns are "said to be increasingly resentful of the Hazara Shiite minority" (US 5 May 2011, 2). An associate professor at the Graduate Institute in Geneva, also indicated in correspondence with the Research Directorate that "a form of jealousy ... has developed towards [the] Hazaras ... now [that they] are in a much better position" politically (Associate Professor 16 May 2011). For this reason, the Associate Professor added, the situation of the Hazaras remains "fragile" (ibid.).

According to the Congressional Research Service, the Hazaras remain "wary of repression by Pashtuns and other larger ethnic factions" (US 3 June 2011, 7). A long history of conflict with the Pashtuns lies at the root of Hazara opposition to the Afghan government's recent efforts to negotiate a power-sharing deal with the Taliban (Professor 12 May 2011). The Hazaras, together with the Tajiks and Uzbeks, see the efforts as an expression of President Hamid Karzai's "long-held desire to restore the dominance of ethnic Pashtuns" in Afghanistan (*The New York Times* 26 June 2010). As a Washington-based Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty correspondent explains, the Hazaras "are extremely frightened by the idea of the Taliban returning to the government" (22 Apr. 2011). The *New York Times* adds that "[c]ontinued Hazara gains ... depend on the Taliban never returning to official power" (4 Jan. 2010).

Treatment of Hazara people

The US State Department's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2010* indicates that Shiite Hazaras continue to experience "[s]ocial discrimination ... along class, race, and religious lines" (8 Apr. 2011, 49). Unlike the Pashtuns who are permitted to cross borders freely, for example, the Hazaras are "occasionally" being asked to pay "additional bribes" (US 8 Apr. 2011, 49). In some areas, Hazaras and other Shiites are being extorted for money "through illegal taxation" and face "forced recruitment and forced labor, physical abuse, and detention" (ibid.). Freedom House also indicates in its annual report that the Hazara Shiite Muslims were one of three religious groups that faced "official obstacles and discrimination by the Sunni Muslim majority" (3 May 2010).

More specifically, there were varying reports of a fatal attack in June 2010 by the Taliban against a group of Hazara men in the Uruzgan (Oruzgan, Uruguan) province (*The New York Times* 25 June 2010; Reuters 25 June 2010; US May 2011, 218). The *New York Times* reported that the Taliban ambushed and killed nine Hazara men in Uruzgan, a Pashtun-dominated area, because they suspected the Hazaras of working for international military forces (25 June 2010). The Afghan police officials who spoke with the New York newspaper at the time were unable to verify suggestions that the men had been beheaded (*New York Times* 25 June 2010). However, Reuters, citing a senior police official, reported that the decapitated corpses of 11 Hazara men had been found in the Khas Uruzgan district of Uruzgan province, north of the "Taliban stronghold" of Kandahar (25 June 2010). The police official identified the deaths as "the work of the Taliban," adding that the men were killed "because they were ethnic Hazaras and Shi'ite Muslims" (Reuters 25 June 2010).

The international, national and local media have also reported on clashes between Hazara and Kuchi (Kochi) communities (Pajhwok Afghan News 13 Aug. 2010; AFP 13 Aug. 2010; *Daily Outlook Afghanistan* 15 Aug. 2010; *Kabul Weekly* 18 Aug. 2010; UN 23 Nov. 2010; EurasiaNet.org 23 Nov. 2010). The Hazaras and the nomad community of Pashtun Kuchis have been clashing, usually violently, over the right to land (UN 23 Nov. 2010; EurasiaNet.org 23 Nov. 2010). The Kuchis "accuse Hazaras of denying their centuries-long right to pasture land for ethnic reasons," while the Hazaras in Wardak and Bamyan provinces "accuse Kuchi herders of invading their villages, damaging farmlands and property" (UN 23 Nov. 2010). In August 2010, violence broke out in a west Kabul neighbourhood because of a dispute over land claimed by the Kuchis but used as a cemetery by the Hazaras (EurasiaNet.org 23 Nov. 2010; *Daily Outlook*

Afghanistan 15 Aug. 2010). Sources vary in their reports on the number of people killed in the clash, indicating that between two (AFP 13 Aug. 2010) and five people died as a result of the violence (*Daily Outlook Afghanistan* 15 Aug. 2010).

Editorials from two local media sources deplored the violence and voiced concern about the risk of ethnic tensions escalating further (*ibid.*; *Kabul Weekly* 18 Aug. 2010). While the *Daily Outlook Afghanistan* called on the government to "get serious about the Kuchi-Hazara conflict" (15 Aug. 2010), the *Kabul Weekly* blamed the government for stoking ethnic tensions and politicians for "inciting public feeling for their personal interests" (18 Aug. 2010). A professor and director of the Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy at the Australian National University, writing about the Hazara and Kuchi dispute in correspondence with the Research Directorate, argues that

to see the violence and displacement experienced by Hazaras ... as simply a consequence of land disputes between settled Hazaras and Pushtun nomads (kuchis) ... reflects an overly-simplified reading of complex social relations. (Professor 20 May 2011)

The professor, who has published extensively on Afghan politics for over two decades, adds that

latent tensions over issues such as land are tailor-made for oppositional groups that seek to build support by assisting one party or another, and there is every reason to suspect a Taliban role in fuelling such tensions. ... [T]he position of Hazaras as an overwhelmingly Shiite non-Pushtun minority makes them an easy target for overwhelmingly-Pushtun Taliban seeking to rebuild support from Sunni Pushtun groups such as the kuchis. (*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 sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: The following people were unable to provide information for this Response: a professor of anthropology at Boston University; a professor of history at the University of California, Los Angeles; and a professor of anthropology and sociology at Williams College. Attempts to contact the following people or organizations were unsuccessful: a professor of history at Stanford University; a fellow with the State Building and Human Rights in Afghanistan and Pakistan program at the Harvard Kennedy School; a representative with Minority Rights Group International; the Research Director of the Minorities at Risk project with the Center for International Development and Conflict Management at the University of Maryland; a professor of sociology at Portland State University; and an associate professor of history at Stanford University.

Internet sites, including: *Afghan Daily*, Afghan Network, *Aljazeera*, Amnesty International, British Broadcasting Corporation, Hazara.net, Hazara People, Human Rights Watch, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, International Crisis Group, Islamic Human Rights Commission, United Nations ReliefWeb.

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