



Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group

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Hazara Asylum Seekers from Afghanistan: the increasing dangers they would face if they return

Supplementary update: 28th February 2014

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The following is a list of related papers:

- **Collection of new material: 8th November 2012**
- **Supplementary update: 12th February 2013**
- **Supplementary update: 19th May 2013**
- **Supplementary update: 28th February 2014**

All of these papers are available on our website:

bmrsg.org.au/research-material/afganistan/

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Introduction

The flurry of specific information, commentary and developments on this topic in the year preceding my May 2013 update has not been sustained. However this does not mean that the situation has improved. The extreme state of affairs pictured in May 2013 resulted in widespread warnings and calls for responsible action. The Taliban were infiltrating all parts of the Hazarajat and beyond and victimizing Hazaras relentlessly. For the following 3 reasons, at least, Hazaras were expressing mounting fear and fleeing in their thousands: (a) the late 2012 declaration by the Taliban that it is their duty to kill Hazaras, (b) the impending withdrawal of Coalition troops, and (c) the obvious failure of the Karzai government to offer security and protection to Hazaras. Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission produced a damning report on the situation and a strong plea for intervention.

The international responses were clear and significant. Leaders of the UN, the EC and the USA were called upon to intervene against the genocide of the Hazara people. Amnesty International expressed grave concerns about any suggestion of returning Hazara asylum seekers to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Amnesty, noted for its reliable and responsible research, declared that *"The security situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating and we are extremely fearful for their safety"*. Very significantly the Canadian government implemented a moratorium on the return of "failed" asylum seekers to Afghanistan.

Anecdotal evidence

Discussions with my numerous Hazara friends, many with continuing links to Afghanistan, have yielded some significant recurring themes:

- targetted persecution of Hazaras is increasing but the many small incidents are rarely reported in any media;
- the persecution often has violent elements involving torture and murder;
- while the victims often include women, children and older men, it is young men who are the priority target, both as a strategy for genocide and as a means of forced recruitment for fighting duties, especially to be sent to the front lines as "gun fodder";
- while the victims may be rich or poor, the focus is on those who own land, animals, houses, shops and other businesses, vehicles and even jewellery;
- those with perceived connections with foreigners are especially vulnerable.

Taliban resurgence as the Coalition troops withdraw

Reports abound of growing violence perpetrated by the Taliban as the Coalition forces are withdrawn. **Appendix 1** contains quotations from 11 such reports. Most of these accounts and summaries do not specify Hazaras as targets. Yet the implications should not be missed. There is no doubt that a priority agenda of the Taliban is imposition of Sunni extremist values. This means that, apart from foreigners, Shia Muslims are the primary enemy, and in Afghanistan, with limited exceptions, the Shias are the Hazaras. Some Hazaras are Sunnis and some members of other ethnic groups are Shias, but in general the correspondence is

very strong and well-known. The Taliban also target Hazaras for historic reasons. And they can do so very easily because of the distinctive Mongoloid facial features of Hazaras. The important point is that Hazaras are especially vulnerable in any situation where the Taliban are out of control. After a few years of respite, this now means most of the area of Afghanistan, including the capital city Kabul. Just before the most recent bombing in Kabul (17th January 2014), owned by the Taliban, the Taliban leadership told the BBC's John Simpson that it was now back in control of large areas of Afghanistan and was confident of returning to power after Western troops left (see appendix, report 11). Add the fact that Taliban leaders have publicly stated their intention of targeting Hazaras. As a consequence, many commentators are reviving the term "genocide", and this would seem to be based on sound evidence and reasons.

Five recent reports confirm and demonstrate that the situation is not improving

1. Afghanistan still not safe for asylum seekers, says country's defence minister

David Wroe, National security correspondent for the Sydney Morning Herald
19th February, 2014

<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/afghanistan-still-not-safe-for-asylum-seekers-says-countrys-defence-minister-20140219-32zhh.html#ixzz2tkeNcCE3>

"Afghanistan is still at war and it is not safe for asylum seekers to return, says the country's Defence Minister. Visiting Canberra for talks on Australia's future military involvement in Afghanistan, Bismillah Khan Mohammadi said his country was still at war and many people had clearly fled because it was too dangerous."

Given that almost all refugees (asylum seekers) from Afghanistan are Hazaras, this up to date assessment from a senior cabinet member is especially pertinent.

2. Taliban attacks on "Death Road" highlight continuing persecution of Afghanistan's Hazara minority

Greg Keller (Associated Press Afghanistan Specialist)
22nd January, 2014

<http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2014/01/22/taliban-attacks-on-death-road-highlight-continuing-persecution-of-afghanistan-s-hazara-minority.html>

This report emphasises that Hazaras are selectively targeted among travellers on the "Death Road", part of the Highway between Kabul and Behsud.

"A 30-kilometer (18-mile) stretch of two paved lanes heading west from the town of Maidan Shahr in central Afghanistan has seen many beheadings, kidnappings and other Taliban attacks in recent years against members of the minority ethnic Hazara community. Nowadays, nearly all drivers avoid it."

"The threat of attack on Death Road is so great that Hazaras who've moved by the tens of thousands east to the capital in search of work are afraid to travel back to their home villages."



"The situation is a reminder of how fragile Afghanistan's ethnic and sectarian balance remains less than a year before all foreign forces are to leave the country. The area has become a flashpoint for conflict between the Hazaras and Afghanistan's majority ethnic group, the Pashtuns."

"Since a 2011 suicide bombing that killed over 70 Hazaras in Kabul, Afghanistan has not seen the sort of large-scale massacres that have claimed the lives of hundreds of Hazaras in neighboring Pakistan each year. But smaller-scale killings like those on the road remain a source of fear."

"He estimates that over the past 10 years some 40 percent of the district's population has fled."

"Hundreds of thousands of Hazaras have found their way to Dasht-e-Barchi, a sprawling Hazara district in western Kabul. It sprang virtually out of the desert 10 years ago, and now is home to an estimated 1.5 million Hazara."

"Twenty-four people have been kidnapped and most killed by Taliban on this road, all Hazaras."

3. Afghans Flee Homes as U.S. Pulls Back: More than 590,000 Afghans had been displaced by fighting and Taliban threats by late August.

Margherita Stancati in Kabul and Rachel Pannett in Makassar, Indonesia
Wall Street Journal, 15th October 2013

<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303382004579127432990605714?mg=reno64-wsj&url=http%3A%2F%2Fonline.wsj.com%2Farticle%2FSB10001424052702303382004579127432990605714.html>

This article tells how Wazira, a 37-year-old mother of six, abandoned her home and apple orchard in Afghanistan's rural Wardak province in 2012 and moved with her whole family into a single room on the fringes of Kabul. "We didn't have any choice but to come to Kabul," she said. "The Taliban were forcing us to prepare food for them. But if we did, the government would harass us. We were stuck in the middle."

Most importantly the report notes that according to the United Nations more than 590,000 Afghans had been displaced from their homes by fighting and Taliban threats by late August 2013, a 21% increase since January 2012 and more than four times the number reported in 2006, when the insurgency began in earnest.

The article repeats the now common mantra that U.N. officials worry that widening violence could kick off an exodus abroad when American-led forces leave the country later in 2014.

"For those trying to leave Afghanistan altogether, the first stop often is neighboring Iran or Pakistan. Some who are wealthy or lucky enough head for Europe or Australia . . . Some 38,000 people from Afghanistan have managed to get into industrialized nations to apply for asylum last year, more than from any other country, according to the U.N., and the highest figure since the U.S. invasion in 2001."



“The desperation is incredible,” says Richard Danziger, the Afghanistan head of the International Organization for Migration, a U.N. affiliate that is helping resettle the refugees.

“The bulk of Afghan migrants aim for Western Europe, according to U.N. data.”

The report quotes Ali Shah, a 60-year-old baker from the Muqur district in Ghazni province, a Taliban stronghold. In 2012, Mr. Shah fled his home with 10 family members. **“Muqur is not safe,” he says. “The Taliban run their own government. They control checkpoints and administer justice.”** [emphasis added]

The report also makes clear that **most of those who flee “belong to the ethnic Hazara minority** that has been persecuted by the Taliban, and that has the most to lose should the Taliban return to power after the American withdrawal.”

“All the people are worried about what will happen after 2014, and so are the Hazaras,” says Afghan Hazara leader Mohammed Mohaqeq, who is running for vice president in next year’s national elections. He survived an assassination attempt in June. “Security is getting worse everywhere,” he says.

4. Fortress Australia keeping out persecuted Hazaras from Afghanistan

Antony Loewenstein, 15th October 2013

<http://antonyloewenstein.com/2013/10/15/fortress-australia-keeping-out-persecuted-hazaras-from-afghanista>

Anthony Lowenstein, an expert commentator on the Middle East, draws on article 1 above and emphasises that **“the Hazaras are constantly under attack by extremists and many of them must flee for a safer life.”** [emphasis added]

5. Life as One of the Most-Persecuted Ethnic Groups on the Planet

Jeffrey Stern, 22nd May 2013

<http://www.hazarapeople.com/2013/05/22/life-as-one-of-the-most-persecuted-ethnic-groups-on-the-planet/>

This rather poetic piece is very telling. Jeffrey Stern sets the plight of today’s Hazara minority in historical context, highlighting more than 120 years of sustained persecution based on differences in belief and appearance. Many escaped but millions did not. More than half were killed and those who survived were relegated to the bottom rungs of society, discriminated against in terms of education and employment. The emergence of the Taliban exacerbated the intolerance and culminated in open persecution and threats of genocide.

Iran seemed like a natural safe refuge, but it has proved fragile at best because of blatant racial prejudice. Thousands of Hazaras moved on to Iraq, but Saddam Hussain labelled them as spies and drove them out. Syria was more hospitable but did not allow acceptance of Hazaras as citizens, making them, as Shias, especially vulnerable to recriminations by the Sunni victims of the Shia president, in the recent uprising. Lack of citizenship blocks legal escape.

Those who went south-eastwards from Afghanistan to Pakistan found only temporary refuge. Today Pakistan is just as dangerous for Hazaras as Afghanistan. The Taliban and their friends operate without restraint to openly persecute and attack Hazaras.

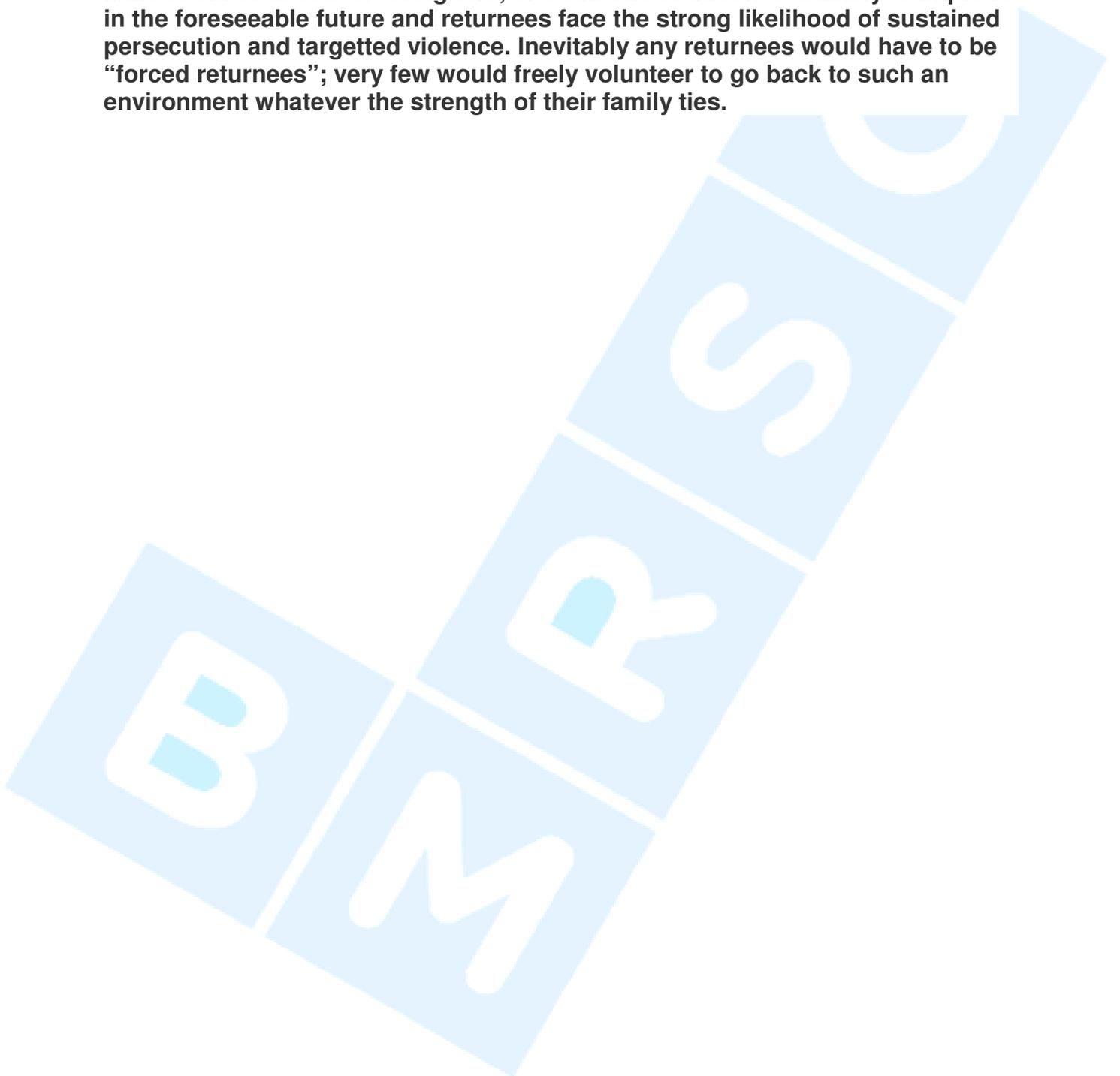
The only hope for safety is to try to keep moving on.



[Note: already 4 million Hazaras have fled from Afghanistan and can now be found in 72 countries]

Conclusion

There is no escaping the conclusion that in February 2014 Afghanistan remains a very dangerous place for Hazara people, especially young men with links to either assets or foreigners, or both. The situation is unlikely to improve in the foreseeable future and returnees face the strong likelihood of sustained persecution and targeted violence. Inevitably any returnees would have to be “forced returnees”; very few would freely volunteer to go back to such an environment whatever the strength of their family ties.





Appendix

Quotations from selected reports and commentary pieces on Taliban violence in Afghanistan since May 2013.

This is a chronological assembly of quotations from relevant reports and summaries on Taliban initiated violence in Afghanistan since May 2013. The list is not exhaustive.

1. Taliban attack CIA compound in latest Afghanistan violence

Rezwan Natiq and Jay Price, McClatchy Foreign Staff, 25th June 2013

<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2013/06/25/194909/taliban-attack-cia-compound-in.html>

Insurgents armed with rocket-propelled grenades opened fire on the Kabul offices of the CIA early Tuesday in a coordinated attack in one of the capital's most heavily fortified neighborhoods, which is also home to Afghanistan's presidential place and the main headquarters for the U.S.-led international military coalition.

It was the latest in a string of high-profile attacks in the city over the last few weeks, including one on the military side of the international airport and another just outside the country's Supreme Court building. It came as U.S. diplomats and Afghan leaders tried to figure out how get the stalled negotiations with the Taliban over peace talks in Doha, Qatar, back on track.

2. Afghanistan Violence: Taliban Kill 12 Afghan Civilians, Aid Workers

RAHIM FAIEZ, 27th August 2013

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/27/afghanistan-violence_n_3821069.html

Violence in Afghanistan has increased in recent months as insurgents fight to regain territory, trying to take advantage of the handover of the country's security from the NATO-led coalition to Afghan forces ahead of the withdrawal of all foreign combat forces at the end of 2014.

Civilian casualties have spiked this spring and summer. The U.N. said in its mid-year report that casualties were up 23 per cent compared to the first six months of 2012.

3. Afghan Taliban intensifies violence, 30 killed in 5 days

6th September, 2013

<http://www.firstpost.com/world/afghan-taliban-intensifies-violence-30-killed-in-5-days-1089203.html>

Nearly 30 people have been killed in Afghanistan in the past five days as the Afghan Taliban intensified its offensive across the war-torn country, Xinhua reported on Thursday. Early on Thursday morning, two armed militants were killed and three civilians were wounded in an attack on a mosque in the national capital Kabul. "Two terrorists armed with two AK-47 guns, two pistols, two knives and ammunition entered Imam Hassan-e-Mujtaba mosque in western Kabul. They opened indiscriminate fire on people who were offering their morning prayers, injuring three people," the National Security Directorate (NDS), the country's intelligence agency, said in a statement. The attackers, who were Pakistani nationals, wore police uniform to disguise themselves during the attack, the NDS said.

- Eight civilians, including six women, were wounded when a Taliban mortar round hit a house near an army base in Maiwand district of Kandahar province late on Wednesday night, the provincial government said in a statement.
- Also on Wednesday night, four policemen were killed in a Taliban attack on a police checkpoint in Shindand district of Herat province.
- In eastern Paktiya province, a tribal leader named Muqbil Fazli was shot dead Wednesday.
- In Ghazni province, the militants broke into the house of a local leader, Noor-ul-Haq Aghondzada, killing him and his two sons Tuesday night.
- Also Tuesday, judge Sayed Ahmad Khaliqi was shot dead in a drive-by shooting in Herat city, capital of Herat province.
- Four policemen were killed when an improvised explosive device (IED) targeted vehicle of the governor of Badakhshan province.



May 2013 update on Hazara Asylum Seekers from Afghanistan: the increasing dangers they would face if they return

- Afghan security forces Monday arrested a would-be Taliban suicide bomber in Kunar province, foiling an attack on a congested bazaar there.
- More than 40 trucks and oil tankers were destroyed and two heavy armed militants were killed when Taliban launched a coordinated attack at a parking lot near a military base in eastern Nangarhar province Monday morning.
- Earlier, seven bullet-riddled bodies were found in Ghazni. The victims were said to be members of security forces kidnapped by militants along a main road in the province.
- Workers of a local mine company were killed on Sunday when their vehicle touched off an IED in relatively peaceful eastern Parwan province.

Local analysts fear that the Taliban would launch more attacks across the country as Afghan army and police take the lead in combat operations and most of the foreign forces are due to withdraw from Afghanistan by the end of next year.

4. Taliban attacks: violence in Afghanistan has 'never stopped' – expert

Roman Kosarev, 13th September 2013

Taliban militants attacked a US consulate in western Afghanistan on Friday morning, killing an Afghan guard and injuring six others, police said. Police officers said consulate staff were evacuated by helicopter, but police chief for Herat province denied this, saying the diplomats were safe inside the compound. The Voice of Russia discussed this disturbing attack with Deepak Tripathi – a Middle East Expert and also a former Afghanistan correspondent.

Deepak Tripathi: "The experience of the Soviet withdrawal in 1988-1989 shows that militants tend to increase their attacks as the foreign forces prepare to withdraw. And that is what we are seeing now, because the foreign forces, when they are withdrawing, they have to pack up their arms, they have to travel light. Much of the American armaments are going to be destroyed, as the report says so far, but they will still have to carry light weapons. So, when the foreign forces are preparing to withdraw as Mujahidins in the past the Taliban now will launch more dramatic attacks to show that they are present and we will have to deal with them after the withdrawal of the foreign forces."

"The biggest risks after the withdrawal depend on how many of the foreign forces are left and are they able to support sufficiently the Afghan security forces. But if the Afghan security forces find themselves without much support, then there is a real risk that they will disintegrate, at least partially."

5. Afghan violent incidents claim 44 lives, Taliban vows to continue war

English.news.cn, 14th October 2013

http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2013-10/14/c_132798237.htm

Militancy and counter-militancy have claimed the lives of 44 people with majority of them Taliban fighters in the conflict-ridden Afghanistan over the 24 hours, officials said Monday.

In the latest violent attack against security forces, according to an official source, four police personnel lost their lives as a roadside bomb organized by anti-government militants struck a police van in Taliban former stronghold of the southern Kandahar province on Sunday evening. "A mine planted by militants on a road in Takhtapol district of Kandahar province struck a police vehicle on Sunday evening leaving four border police personnel dead including Sediqullah, a checkpoint commander," district governor Mahmoud Achakzai told Xinhua.

The Taliban supreme leader Mullah Mohammad Omar whose fighters have been fighting the Afghan government and NATO-led forces in Afghanistan has reiterated his determination for continuation of the war till the eviction of foreign forces from the war-ravaged country.

6. Taliban using violence and threatening letters to control rural communities

18th November 2013

<http://www.thejournal.ie/taliban-afghanistan-1180123-Nov2013/>

Due to its failure to take territory from the national army, the Taliban has resorted to intimidating the population, a new United Nations report has revealed.



May 2013 update on Hazara Asylum Seekers from Afghanistan: the increasing dangers they would face if they return

The terrorist group has concentrated its efforts on silencing community leaders who are not supportive of their programme, a team that monitors group leaders and sanctions said.

"Targeted assassinations, the wanton use of improvised explosive devices and threatening letters have been effective among many in rural communities," the report to the Security Council by the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team explained.

7. UN alarmed by ongoing Afghan violence

21st November 2013

<http://www.dawn.com/news/1057600/un-alarmed-by-ongoing-afghan-violence>

UNITED NATIONS: The UN General Assembly has unanimously adopted a resolution expressing alarm about ongoing eruptions of violence in Afghanistan as the battered country is just five months away from national elections.

The wide-ranging, 21-page resolution passed by consensus says that the world body "stresses the need to continue to address the threat to the security and stability of Afghanistan caused by the ongoing violent and terrorist activity by the Taliban, Al Qaeda and other violent and extremist groups and other illegal armed groups and criminals, including those involved in the narcotics trade."

It blames those outlaw and terrorist groups for "the significant majority of civilian casualties."

8. Afghan refugees in India refuse to return fearing violence

PTI, 22 December 2013

http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-12-22/news/45475836_1_afghan-refugees-unhcr-taliban

NEW DELHI: As US forces' drawdown from Afghanistan looms, Afghan refugees living in the national capital refuse to return to their homes fearing violence.

There were more than 18,000 refugees in India as of 2011, according to the External Affairs Ministry. And about 10,000 Afghan refugees are registered with UNHCR at present.

There is pervasive fear among Afghan refugees here about returning home mainly due to continued violence and the threat of Taliban's ascendancy once the US-led ISAF troops leave Afghanistan.

Sher Mohammad, 35, came to India about a year ago, escaping the threats of Taliban which "abducted his younger son, Amir (11), to employ him as a laborer".

"They let him go after I negotiated with them. We came to India immediately after the incident. They would have killed us all," he said.

Mohammad, who fled from Ghazini province, is one among the thousands of Afghan refugees living in India. He is reluctant to return to his country, fearing threat to his family from Taliban.

"If I return, they will not let us live. They will kill us. Sab Khatam...(Everything ends)," he said.

Though living in Delhi is expensive and he is hardly able to earn enough to pay his rent and eat, Mohammad said his family is at-least safe this way.

Sulaiman, 26, an Afghan graduate, from Kabul, shares the same concerns.

"The situation in Afghanistan is still bad. There is no sign of peace. People fear that once they (NATO troops) return, the country will be in hands of Taliban again. This is not the safe time to return," Sulaiman said.

9. Violent crime against Afghan women hits record levels, says rights chief

Al Jazeera and Reuters, 5th January 2014

<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/1/5/violent-crime-againstafghanwomenhitsrecordlevels.html>

Violent crime against women in Afghanistan hit record levels and became increasingly brutal in 2013, the head of the country's human rights commission said this weekend — a sign that hard won rights are being rolled back as foreign troops prepare to withdraw.

The United Nations in December reported a 28 percent increase in cases of brutality against women for October 2012 through September 2013. Sima Samar, chair of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), told Reuters that the severity of attacks on women had greatly intensified last year.

"The brutality of the cases is really bad. Cutting the nose, lips and ears. Committing public rape," she said.

It is possible that more cases have been reported as women become aware of their rights, but Samar attributed the overall increase in crime to a culture of impunity and the imminent departure of international troops and aid workers, leaving women more exposed to attack.

"Killing women in Afghanistan is an easy thing. There's no punishment," Suraya Pakzad, who runs women's shelters in several provinces, told Reuters in her office in the western city of Herat. She cited recent cases in which women had been publicly stoned as Afghan troops looked on.

"Laws are improved, but implementation of those laws are in the hands of warlords... I think we are going backwards," she said.

10. Afghanistan: Taliban 'poised to regain Helmand' after British exit

Deborah Haynes, The Times, 6th January 06, 2014

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/afghanistan-taliban-poised-to-regain-helmand-after-british-exit/story-fnb64oi6-1226795841705#>

Hard-fought territory in southern Afghanistan will fall to the Taliban after British forces withdraw this year, British commanders and military experts believe.

General Sir David Richards, who was Chief of the Defence Staff until last summer, said that the ability of the Afghan Army to mount counterinsurgency operations without Western support would "rapidly fall away".

11. Suicide bomb attack on Kabul restaurant 'kills 14'

BBC, 17th January 2014

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-25781948>

[Quoted in full]

At least 14 people have been killed in a suicide bomb and gun attack on a restaurant popular with foreigners in the Afghan capital, officials say.

Foreigners, including an IMF representative from Lebanon and a Briton, were also among those killed in Kabul's Wazir Akbar Khan neighbourhood.

The area is home to a number of foreign embassies and organisations - the UN said four of its staff were missing.

The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack on the Taverna du Liban.

The restaurant is popular with foreign nationals, diplomats and aid workers, and was busy with diners at the time of the attack.

A suicide attacker detonated his explosives outside the gate of the heavily-fortified restaurant, Deputy Interior Minister Mohammad Ayoub Salangi said.

Two gunmen then entered the restaurant and started "indiscriminately killing" people inside.

Mr Salangi said four women were among the dead.

The UK Foreign Office (FCO) confirmed that a British national was among those killed in the incident and that it was ready to provide consular assistance to the person's family.

International Monetary Fund Managing Director Christine Lagarde later said Wabel Abdallah - the head of the fund's Afghanistan office - was among those who died.

"This is tragic news, and we at the fund are all devastated," Ms Lagarde said in a statement.

Abdul Majid, a chef at the restaurant, told AFP news agency that he was sitting with his friends "in the kitchen when an explosion happened and smoke filled the kitchen".

"A man came inside shouting and he started shooting. One of my colleagues was shot and fell down. I ran to the roof and threw myself to the neighbouring property."

Taliban claim

The well-known owner of the restaurant was also among those killed.

The attackers were eventually shot dead by the security forces when they arrived at the scene.

The restaurant's chef, Abdul Majid, was among those injured

The BBC's Mahfouz Zubaide heard the blast and gunfire from at least two kilometres away. He said the gunfire went on sporadically for about 10 minutes.

Several hours later, UN officials in Kabul said four of its personnel, who may have been in the area at the time, were still unaccounted for.

"The UN is making efforts to clarify the status of its personnel," spokesman Ari Gaitanis told AFP.

The Taliban has claimed responsibility for the attack, saying it had been deliberately targeting foreign officials.

Security continues to be a major concern in Afghanistan. The last remaining contingent of Nato-led forces is due to leave by the end of the year, having handed over security to Afghan forces.

Washington is pushing Afghan President Hamid Karzai to sign an agreement which would allow some US troops to stay behind after this year's withdrawal.

The Taliban told the BBC's John Simpson earlier this week that it was now back in control of large areas of Afghanistan and was confident of returning to power after Western troops left.

Our correspondent says it is hard to believe the Taliban could make a comeback as things stand, but their takeover of Kabul in 1996 was unexpected, and they could be strengthened if a weak, corrupt president is elected in April.