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Afghanistan

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution proclaims that "followers of other religions are free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of law." However, it also states that Islam is the "religion of the state" and that "no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam." While the Government generally respected the right to religious freedom, years of Taliban rule and weak democratic institutions have contributed to intolerance manifested in widespread acts of harassment and sometimes violence against reform-minded Muslims and religious minorities.

Still recovering from twenty-five years of violence, the country has been moving into an age of greater stability and democracy. Since 2004, the country has held democratic presidential, parliamentary, and provincial council elections. In April 2006, President Karzai nominated a second cabinet, and by early August 2006, the new parliament had confirmed all of the twenty-five ministers nominated and all but one of the justices of the new supreme court. Efforts to reform the judiciary were underway with assistance from the U.S. and the international community. The Government took positive steps to increase religious freedom. Minister for Women's Affairs Massouda Jalal worked with the Ministry for Religious Affairs and the Hajj to provide women with greater access to mosques. The Government also responded positively to international approaches on religious freedom and worked effectively on high-profile cases such as the cases of Mohaqeq Nasab and Abdul Rahman.

Despite reform efforts, there was an increase in the number of reports of problems involving religious freedom compared to previous years. Several high-profile cases involving religious freedom sparked demonstrations in major cities during the period covered by this report. The Danish cartoon controversy, in particular, resulted in several large demonstrations and more than a dozen deaths across the country. Condemnations of conversions from Islam and censorship increased concerns about citizens' ability to freely practice their religion.

The country's population was nearly entirely Muslim. Non-Muslim minority groups faced some incidents of discrimination and persecution. Conversion, which was generally held by many citizens to contravene Islam and Shari'a, garnered much public attention due to a high profile case that occurred during the reporting period. Due to societal pressure, most local Christians hid their religion from their neighbors and others. As a result, little information was available about this community or the challenges it faced. The local Sikh and Hindu populations, although allowed to practice publicly, continued to face problems obtaining land for cremation purposes and faced harassment during major celebrations. Within the Muslim population, relations among the different sects of Islam continued to be difficult. Historically, the minority Shi'a community has faced discrimination from the majority Sunni population, and such discrimination continued to exist.

Prior to the fall of the Taliban, the U.S. government had not maintained an official presence in the country for more than a decade. The secretary of state designated the Taliban as a particularly severe violator of religious freedom with country of particular concern status in 1999, 2000, and 2001. The U.S. government regularly discusses religious freedom issues with government officials as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. embassy officials continued to send political, civil society, and religious leaders to programs in the United States, and during the reporting period, the U.S. military helped rebuild fifty mosques damaged during the many years of war. Some Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) provided assistance to build madrassahs, or religious schools, for local communities. The embassy also

advocated for the Hindu and Sikh community in their efforts to obtain land for cremation. Although land was assigned, the embassy continued to work to finalize the agreement. Together with the international community, the U.S. government expressed concern at the treatment of local converts to Christianity.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 251,738 square miles and a population of approximately 25.8 million. Reliable data on religious demography was not available because an official nationwide census has not been conducted in decades. Observers estimated that 80 percent of the population was Sunni Muslim; 19 percent was Shi'a Muslim; and other religious groups, including Sikhs, Hindus, and one Jew, made up less than 1 percent of the population. There also was a small, hidden Christian community; there were no reliable figures on its size, but estimates ranged from 500 to 8 thousand. In addition, there were small numbers of adherents of other religious groups, mostly Buddhist foreigners.

Traditionally, the dominant religion has been the sect of Sunni Islam that follows the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. For the last 200 years, Sunnis often have looked to the example of the Darul Uloom madrassah located in Deoband near Delhi, India. The Deobandi school has long sought to "purify" Islam by discarding supposedly un-Islamic accretions to the faith and reemphasizing the models that it believes were established in the Qur'an and the customary practices of the Prophet Muhammad. Additionally, Deobandi scholars often have opposed what they perceive as Western influences. Much of the population adhered to Deobandi-influenced Hanafi Sunnism, but a sizable minority adhered to a more mystical version of Islam, generally known as Sufism. Sufism centers on orders or brotherhoods that follow charismatic religious leaders.

Several regions were religiously homogeneous. Sunni Muslim Pashtuns, centered around the city of Kandahar, dominated the south and east of the country. The homeland of the Shi'a Hazaras was in the Hazarajat, the mountainous central highlands around Bamiyan. Northeastern provinces traditionally have had Ismaili populations. Other areas, including Kabul, the capital, were more heterogeneous. In and around the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif, for example, there was a mix of Sunnis (including ethnic Pashtuns, Turkmen, Uzbeks, and Tajiks) and Shi'a (Hazaras and Qizilbash), including Shi'a Ismailis.

In the past, small communities of Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, and Christians lived in the country; however, most members of these communities emigrated. Even at their peak, these non-Muslim minorities constituted less than 1 percent of the population. Most of the small Hindu and Sikh populations, which once numbered approximately 50 thousand persons, took refuge abroad during the many years of conflict; however, since the fall of the Taliban some minority members have begun to return. Non-Muslims, such as Hindus, Sikhs, and Jews, were estimated to number in the hundreds at the end of Taliban rule. During the reporting period, there were approximately 1,500 Sikhs and 100 Hindu families living in the country. There are five or six gurdwaras, Sikh places of worship, in Kabul, where worshippers generally were free to visit, and few threats were reported. The less distinguishable Hindu population faced little harassment. There were approximately six Hindu temples in four cities. An additional eighteen were destroyed during the many years of war. There was one Christian church and one synagogue. Some who converted to Christianity as refugees have returned. Others may have been born abroad into other religious groups; however, an unofficial tradition of the state considers all citizens to be Muslim.

There were some missionary groups working in the country, but those that actively proselytized remained secret to avoid harassment or arrest by local officials.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The new constitution, ratified in January 2004, replaced the 1964 Constitution as law. Efforts continued to update the existing criminal and civil legal codes to bring them in line with the country's international treaty obligations. Full and effective enforcement of the constitution was an ongoing challenge due to the existence of a judicial system in need of significant reform.

The constitution proclaims that Islam is the "religion of the state"; however, it does not prohibit the practice of other religions. It states that "followers of other religions are free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of law." The constitution also declares that "no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam." Interpretation of the constitution has proved difficult, since it contains both legal and religious elements.

The constitution makes no reference to Shari'a. Article 7 commits the state to abide by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and other international treaties and conventions to which the country is a party.

Article 34 of the constitution protects freedom of expression and of the press. The press law, adopted in 2002, contains an injunction against information that "could mean insult to the sacred religion of Islam and other religions." The ambiguity surrounding what constitutes offensive material offers the potential for abuse of this clause to restrict press freedom and intimidate journalists. The press law does not require information to comply with Shari'a; however, the section on criminal rules states that if no punishment is prescribed in existing legal codes for crimes mentioned in the press law, then the punishment would be in accordance with Shari'a (Hanafi school). These rules also apply to non-Muslims. The law was reviewed by the Ministry of Information and Culture, and President Karzai signed the amended law on mass media in late March 2004. The law on mass media retains the broad and vague content restriction on "subjects that are contrary to principles of Islam and offensive to other religions and sects," but it excludes any reference to Shari'a. The law may be subject to change, since parliament had not reviewed it.

Proselytism was practiced discreetly; there are no laws forbidding the practice, even though it is viewed as contrary to the beliefs of Islam. The Government worked on revising the penal code to bring it in line with international standards during the reporting period.

Conversion from Islam is considered apostasy and is punishable by death under some interpretations of Shari'a. While the constitution makes no direct reference to Shari'a, and Article 7 of the constitution commits the state to abide by the international treaties and conventions requiring protection of religious freedom, no law contrary to the beliefs and provisions of Islam is permissible under the constitution. While not legally prohibited, conversion from Islam is strongly discouraged, and the legal consequences of conversion are subject to legal interpretation.

Some conservative elements advocated that the constitution should favor the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence associated with the Sunnis over the Jafari school used by the Shi'as. These elements also called for the primacy of Shari'a in the legal system; however, the constitution does not grant preferential status to the Hanafi school, nor does it make specific reference to Shari'a law. The constitution also grants that Shi'a law would be applied in cases dealing with personal matters involving Shi'as; there is no separate law applying to non-Muslims.

The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) conducted national consultations on transitional justice, promoted reconciliation at civil society gatherings, and through various media, continued to receive reports of abuses from citizens. In June 2005, President Karzai approved a Transitional Justice Action Plan which was adopted by the cabinet by the end of the year. In 2003, the Ministry of Interior established a Human Rights Department to investigate abuses, and this department set up local branches in the offices of chiefs of police. During the reporting period, all provinces had human rights departments to investigate abuses.

Only Islamic holy days are celebrated as public holidays. The Government has proclaimed the first day of Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, and the Tenth of Muharram (Ashura--both Sunni and Shi'a) as national holidays. All mark events on the Islamic calendar, and there were no reports that these holidays negatively affected other religious groups. The Shi'a community is able to celebrate openly the birthday of Imam Ali, one of the most revered figures in the Shi'a tradition.

The licensing and registration of religious groups is not required.

The components of the educational system that survived more than twenty-five years of war place considerable emphasis on religion. During the reporting period, the public school curriculum included Islamic content but no content from other religious groups. Non-Muslims were not required to study Islam. Detailed religious study was conducted under the guidance of religious leaders. There was no restriction on parental religious teaching. The national curriculum and textbooks that emphasize moderate Islamic terms and principles steadily replaced the preaching of jihad in schools. By the end of the period covered by this report, all schools in Kabul and in fifteen of the thirty-four provinces, mostly surrounding the capital, were using the new texts. The Ministry of Education began introducing human rights as a subject in the national school curriculum at the beginning of the school year in 2003 and extended it nationwide in 2004.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

There was no information available concerning restrictions on the general training of clergy.

While not legally prohibited, conversion is strongly discouraged since it is considered by many to be against the tenets of Islam. During the reporting period, there was one arrest of a convert to Christianity. In March 2006, Abdul Rahman, who converted to Christianity while living abroad during the Taliban regime, was detained for approximately one month and could have faced the death penalty for apostasy, but he was deemed not fit to stand trial before those charges could be brought against him. He was granted asylum in Italy due to potential threats on his life. There were no reports of abuse while in custody.

Immigrants and noncitizens were free to practice their own religions. In Kabul 200 to 300 expatriates met regularly at Christian worship services held in private locations due to the existence of only one Christian church in the country. This church, located within the diplomatic enclave, was not open to local nationals. Buddhist foreigners were free to practice in temples established for the Buddhist immigrant community.

Since the fall of the Taliban, no political parties (other than the Taliban) have been officially banned for religious reasons; however, after the transitional government passed the political parties registration law in 2003, the supreme court temporarily banned communists from forming a political party on the ground that communists are atheists. The ban was later lifted.

Proselytism was practiced discreetly, since it is viewed as contrary to the beliefs of Islam. During the period covered by this report, there were a few minor incidents involving individuals attempting to proselytize. While there was no known action taken against these individuals, some chose to leave the country after being discovered. There were an unknown number of foreign missionaries in the country who worked discreetly to avoid harassment.

There were fewer reports during the period covered by this report of local government officials prohibiting music, movies, and television on religious grounds. The cable television audience in urban centers continued to expand, and unlike in previous years, televisions, radios, and other electronic goods were sold freely, and music was played widely. For example, Kabul continued to have five radio stations, including the official Radio Kabul. Nongovernmental stations broadcast a mix of Afghan, Indian, Pakistani, and Western music. Approximately 90 percent of the country's inhabitants reported some access to radio. The stations had no religious content other than brief prayers and Qur'an readings on the government-controlled radio station.

In January 2003, the supreme court banned cable television nationwide on religious grounds, but the ban was lifted in April 2003, when the Government passed a law allowing the resumption of cable services. In January 2004, Kabul Television broadcasted a female singer for the first time in more than a decade, prompting protests from conservatives on the supreme court, who briefly forced the station to stop airing such performances. Moderates in the Government lifted the ban later that month, saying women singers

on television were permitted under the new constitution. In April 2004, officials in Nangarhar Province briefly banned the appearance of women singers on television; however, their superiors reversed the prohibition. In June and July 2004, Kabul and Jalalabad provincial governments banned cable television; the ban was later lifted.

In August 2005, Radio Bamiyan received isolated threats and complaints were filed against the station for allegedly providing un-Islamic and pro-American programming. In addition, a complaint petition was filed with the Ministry of Information and Culture.

In February 2006, a Kabul-based television station, Afghan Television, was fined \$1,000 (50,300 afghani) for airing un-Islamic material. In addition, two local television stations were warned against programming that ran counter to local culture and did not conform to conservative views held by many in their respective localities.

In June 2006, several news agencies in Kabul claimed they were given a two-page document containing a list of restrictions on the broadcasting and publication of programs and subject matter which are against the morals and religious and accepted customs of the public that provoke people and cause security problems. The Government rejected reports that it had issued these instructions to local media restricting their activities.

Christian-affiliated international relief organizations generally operated throughout the country without interference. There were no reports of incidents of harassment during the period covered by this report. After an attack in late September 2003 that killed two employees of the Voluntary Association for Rehabilitation of Afghanistan, a Taliban spokesman accused the organization and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) of preaching Christianity. There were no further details on the attack during the reporting period.

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Both Sunnis and Shi'as were permitted to go on the Hajj, and there was no quota system for those making the pilgrimage. Participants were selected by lottery.

The Government does not designate religion on national identity cards and does not require individuals to declare a belief in Islam in order to receive citizenship. However, the state, including the courts, traditionally considers all citizens to be Muslim; therefore, some basic citizenship rights of non-Muslims were not respected.

Most women in rural areas wear burqas, a traditional full body and face covering. Since the fall of the Taliban, a number of women in urban areas no longer wear the burqa; however, a majority of women continued to wear some form of head covering either by choice or community pressure. Urban women did not wear burqas before the Taliban imposed this practice.

The constitution requires that the president and vice-president be Muslim and does not distinguish in this respect between Sunnis and Shi'as. This requirement is not explicitly applied to government ministers, but the oath required of ministers suggests adherence to the Islamic faith. The constitution has no religious requirement for members of parliament. There was one Hindu member in the upper house.

The Government failed to provide funding or assistance for Sikh schools. The Sikh community chose to send its children to its own schools because of reported abuse and harassment in government-run schools. A Sikh school in Kabul now reported having only one full-time teacher for 120 students. Four part-time teachers were assigned to the school for adult education but instead taught the children for two hours a week. There were no Christian or Jewish schools in the country.

In family disputes, courts continue to rely on a civil code that is based on the Sunni Hanafi school, regardless of whether the parties involved are Shi'a or Sunni. The civil code also applies to non-Muslims.

In response to questions about marriage, the chief judge of the family court issued guidelines in accordance with the court's interpretation of Shari'a law. Most restrictive is the rule on marriage between non-Muslims, which stipulates that whether born in the country or elsewhere non-Muslims would not be allowed to marry. According to government officials, the court considers all citizens to be Muslims by default and therefore non-Muslim Afghans can be married as long as they do not publicly acknowledge their non-Muslim beliefs. In addition, the judges stated that a Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman, but if she is not "of the book", including Christian or Jewish, she must first convert; however, a Muslim woman is not allowed to marry a non-Muslim man.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Sporadic violations of religious freedom by some officials occurred.

In January 2003, the governor of Helmand Province took control of approximately 200 Hazara-owned shops in Lashkar Gah and distributed them to other town residents. The governor also blocked the Hazara community from building a mosque in Lashkar Gah. While the AIHRC and the UN reached an agreement with the governor in February 2003 to compensate Hazara shopkeepers with land elsewhere in Lashkar Gah, the governor had only partially fulfilled his promise by the end of the period covered by this report.

In June 2003, two editors of a weekly Kabul publication were arrested for allegedly violating Article 30 of the press law that prohibits publication of articles defaming Islam. Conservatives within the judiciary recommended the journalists be charged with "insulting Islam" or blasphemy; however, senior government officials ultimately supported action short of criminal prosecution. Police searched the editors' offices, and the national intelligence agency confiscated the editors' publication, *Aftaab*, from stores. Moderates led by the minister of information and culture argued for the release of the journalists and a resolution to the press law--since amended--that permits administrative punishment (a fine) in lieu of prosecution. Within a week, President Karzai ordered the editors released on bail; however, the charges of blasphemy were not dropped. The two journalists obtained asylum outside the country during the second half of 2003.

In November 2003, twelve Tablighi preachers (itinerant Sunni missionaries) were detained for a day in Kandahar. There was no further police action against Tablighi preachers during the period covered by the report. The Tablighi claimed their mission was to spread the word of Islam. Some government intelligence officials accused the Tablighi of subversive work for Pakistan. Although an investigation of the group's activities concluded that the group was innocent of spying for the Taliban and al-Qa'ida, no action had been taken against the police officers involved in the case by the end of the reporting period.

In May 2005, two students were suspended for a year from Herat University for commenting on Islam during a religious debate in ways that classmates and a teacher found blasphemous. The AIHRC reported the two students were reinstated at the university and all charges against them suspended. Following the arrests, the students were released from jail and housed, for security purposes, at various safe houses.

On October 22, 2005, Ali Mohaqiq Nasab, a journalist and editor of a women's rights magazine, was sentenced to two years in prison by a tribunal for blasphemy for reprinting and commenting on two articles. The articles questioned the harsh punishment imposed on women accused of adultery and theft under traditional Islamic law and advocated that conversion from Islam should not be considered a crime. After being tried in court, his sentence was reduced to six months on appeal (half of this time was suspended), and he was released on December 22, 2005.

There were other unconfirmed reports that converts faced societal discrimination and threats across the country. The press reported the killings of five male converts to Christianity near the eastern border between June and August 2004, but these reports could not be confirmed.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens abducted or illegally

removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

In May 2005, news reports indicated that an Indian Hindu converted to Islam. The conversion ceremony was performed before supreme court representatives, the chief justice and chief of the supreme court, and local and international media. The conversion did not appear to have been forced.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were a few reported abuses targeted at specific religious groups by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report. Terrorist organizations attacked, and in some cases killed, several Muslim clerics for supporting the Government or for stating that activities conducted by terrorist organizations were against the tenets of Islam. There were reports of attacks on non-Muslim international organizations; however, there were no written records to validate the claims.

Attacks by remnants of the al-Qa'ida and Taliban networks continued during the reporting period. In a repeat of previous years, several killings of religious leaders and attacks on mosques were attributed to al-Qa'ida and Taliban members who objected to their victims' links with the Karzai administration and to their public interpretations of Islam. These attacks were perceived by the public to be an attack on the Government and not on Islam.

On June 1, 2005, a mosque in the southern city of Kandahar was bombed during the funeral of an anti-Taliban cleric who had been shot dead three days earlier. Twenty persons, including the chief of the provincial capital's police force, were killed. Taliban insurgents were believed to be behind the attacks.

During the reporting period, numerous schools were attacked. While some claim schools allegedly connected with Christian groups were targeted by the Taliban, Muslim schools were also targets during the reporting period. Therefore, it was difficult to identify whether the motivation behind the attacks was religious or political. Unconfirmed press reports claimed that in September 2004, nine boys and a teacher died when a bomb detonated in the schoolyard of a madrassah in Zurmat. The madrassah offered morning Islamic lessons for local boys and with support from a foreign-funded agency, had added an afternoon curriculum of English, math, and other subjects taught in secular public schools. In addition, the teachers had been involved in helping men and women register to vote. Taliban terrorists claimed responsibility.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The Government continued to stress reconciliation and cooperation among all citizens. Although it primarily was concerned with reconciliation of former Taliban combatants, it also expressed concern about religious intolerance. The Government responded positively to international approaches on human rights, including religious freedom, and worked effectively on high profile cases such as those of Mohaqeq Nasab and Abdul Rahman. The Government continued to indirectly emphasize ethnic and intrafaith reconciliation through the support of the judicial, constitutional, and human rights commissions composed of members of different ethnic and Muslim religious (Sunni and Shi'a) groups. The Constitutional Commission also included a Hindu member to represent non-Muslim religious minorities. The Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Hajj also worked together to give women the opportunity to attend mosques. While women have always had the right to attend mosques, separate areas had to be designated for them. The new initiative provided for such spaces in larger mosques where room was available.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Relations between the different branches of Islam continued to be difficult. Historically, the minority Shi'a faced discrimination from the Sunni population. However, since Shi'a representation increased in government, there apparently was less hostility from Sunnis. Most Shi'a were members of the Hazara ethnic group, which traditionally has been segregated from the rest of society for a combination of political, ethnic, and religious reasons. Throughout the country's history, there have been many examples of conflicts between the Hazaras and other citizens. These conflicts often have had economic and political roots but also have religious dimensions. The treatment of the Shi'a community varied by locality. The

active persecution of the Shi'a minority, including Ismailis, that existed under the Taliban regime has ended. Although some discrimination continued at the local level, Shi'as generally were free to participate fully in public life. The rigid policies adopted both by the Taliban and by certain opposition groups adversely affected adherents of other branches of Islam and other religious groups.

In February 2006, six persons were killed during the Shi'a Ashura processions in Herat. Rumors circulated that Shiites were planning to perform their ritual self-flagellations at Herat's Blue Mosque, an important Sunni religious site. These rumors sparked a countermarch after Shi'a Governor Anwari made a public speech commemorating the holiday. Although the incident took place between religious groups, the event was possibly more politically than religiously motivated. It is believed that rural politicians took advantage of the holiday to foment violence to further their own agendas.

Non-Muslim minorities such as Sikhs, Hindus, and Christians continued to face social discrimination and harassment and, in some cases, violence. This treatment was not systematic, but the Government did little to improve conditions in the last year. For example, in early October 2003, a grenade was lobbed at the only functioning Sikh gurdwara in Kabul. There were no casualties. Prior to the incident, local police had warned the gurdwara authorities of a possible attack. Although police and intelligence officials investigated, no suspects had been apprehended by the end of the reporting period. In April 2005, a Sikh gurdwara in Khost was attacked and robbed by twenty-one armed men. The incident was still under investigation at the end of the reporting period. According to the Sikh community, in the fall of 2005, there was a report of the disappearance of a Sikh traveling from Kabul to Jalalabad. There was no additional information available at the end of the reporting period.

The AIHRC advocated for the rights of Sikhs and Hindus when this community complained in late 2003 that it was being denied access to its traditional cremation ground in Kabul by local residents. The Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs was sympathetic and responsive to this complaint. In March 2004, Kabul municipal authorities allocated an alternative cremation site to the Sikh-Hindu community. The Sikh-Hindu community still alleged that they did not have access to the land and were working with the Kabul Municipality to resolve land titling problems. The site was reported to be in use by the end of the period covered by this report.

Some Sikh and Hindu children were unable to attend government schools due to harassment from teachers and students. The Government did not take sufficient steps to protect these children and reintegrate them into the classroom environment. There were no reports of discrimination toward Christians in schools.

After the fall of the Taliban, there continued to be episodic reports of persons at the local level using coercion to enforce social and religious conformity. In January 2006, religious scholars in Kunduz province issued a resolution describing the celebration of non-Muslim religious festivals as against Shari'a; however, the governor of the province stressed the importance of respecting religious freedom. During the reporting period, President Karzai and other moderates in the Government opposed attempts by conservative elements to enforce rules regarding social and religious practices based on their interpretation of Islamic law.

In contrast to previous years, there were no new reported cases of forced chastity examinations. In 2004, the AIHRC intervened and aggressively launched programs designed to educate all levels of society in the provinces where forced chastity exams were administered. The AIHRC conducted surveys in late 2004 that indicated the practice had declined significantly. From 2004-2005, in Herat there were continued reports of forced chastity examinations by religious police of women found with males who were not their relatives; however, reports declined during the latter months of the reporting period. It was difficult to know whether this practice was systematic or sporadic, or done at the request of family members in the context of an extremely conservative environment. There were no reports of examinations directed at non-Muslims. Local officials also confronted women over their attire and behavior, although there were no known official policies mandating the wearing of the burqa or regulating the activities of women.

Muslim clerics with political connections were also the target of violence. In May 2003, Habibullah, a Muslim cleric with close ties to President Karzai, was shot and killed outside a mosque in Deh Rawood

district. Six persons were detained in connection with the killing. President Karzai issued a statement condemning it. By the end of the reporting period, there were no arrests and no further information on this case, including on the status of the persons originally detained. Also in May 2003, a well-known religious scholar, Mowlawi Haji Abdollah, was shot and killed after leaving a mosque after prayers in central Uruzgan Province. The Government stated that the Taliban and al-Qa'ida were responsible for the crime. The assailants had not been identified by the end of the period covered by this report.

In June 2003, a mosque in Kandahar was bombed during the final prayer of the day and sixteen worshippers were injured. The leader of the mosque and head of Kandahar's Ulema-u-Shura (clerics' council), Mullah Abdullah Fayaz, had stated that the Taliban were not correctly interpreting and following Islam. The Ministry of the Interior stated that two persons were arrested, one in July 2003 and the other in August 2003. In May 2005, the Ministry of Interior reported that one was still in custody pending investigations while the other had escaped. There were no new developments during the reporting period.

In April 2004, Maulana Abdul Bari, a former Minister of Hajj and Religious Affairs in Kandahar, was shot and killed outside his home by suspected Taliban members. At the end of the reporting period, there had been no arrests in the case, which continued to be under investigation. During the second half of 2004, two mullahs were killed in Ghazni and Muqar provinces.

In October 2005, in Helmand Province, a progovernment cleric was killed by a bomb during prayers, which also injured twelve worshippers. During the same month, also in Helmand, a progovernment mullah was killed in a drive-by shooting on his way home. The same day, two progovernment religious leaders were gunned down in Konar Province. The large number of religious figures killed in that month was attributed to antigovernment activity rather than to Sunni-Shi'a tension. It appeared that terrorists were trying to eliminate individuals with moderate religious views.

On September 7, 2004, NGOs reported and the AIHRC confirmed that a large mob attacked several offices and vehicles of NGOs, including the Agha Khan Development Network, in Faizabad in Badakhshan Province. The attack appeared to have been in response to rumors that the Agha Khan Development Network was using its aid projects to convert Sunni Muslims to Ismaili Shi'ism. Two women workers were raped at the NGOs' offices. The AIHRC also cited unconfirmed reports of rocket attacks on NGOs in Faizabad during that and other incidents.

In March 2005, a person in Helmand Province was beheaded, reportedly because of religious beliefs. No one was charged with the killing.

On May 9, 2005, *Newsweek* reported that U.S. interrogators desecrated the Qur'an at Guantanamo Bay. The report sparked demonstrations throughout the country, which resulted in the deaths of 17 persons and injury to another 120 persons. A local newspaper reported that an Islamic group reportedly linked to the ousted Taliban regime declared jihad, or holy war, against U.S.-led troops and the Government over the alleged Qur'an desecration.

Controversy over the Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad created a widespread public backlash. More than twelve persons were killed and many injured in protests that lasted a week and took place in several provinces. Response by government officials was mixed with members of the supreme court calling for censorship of Danish media, in contrast to President Karzai who accepted apologies and called for calm.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with government officials as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

U.S. representatives met regularly with government officials and with religious and minority figures in an ongoing dialogue regarding the political, legal, religious, and human rights context of the country's reconstruction. The United States worked with civil society organizations to promote religious tolerance.

U.S. officials in Kabul and Washington urged the Government to quickly resolve the Abdul Rahman case. President Bush and Secretary of State Rice both made strong public statements calling for the release of Rahman.

The U.S. embassy actively promoted professional and cultural ties between local citizens and the United States. The public affairs section coordinated a variety of exchange, speaker, artistic, and information programs to generate an exchange of ideas between Americans and local citizens on democracy and civil society, human rights, Islam in America, and other subjects. The United States funded travel by local journalists, academics, politicians, government officials, religious scholars, community leaders, women, youth, and NGO officials to engage with their counterparts in the United States.

The U.S. embassy continued to send local mullahs to the United States to participate in programs on democracy, civil society and Islam in America. Since 2003, the U.S. government funded visits to the United States for approximately fifty mullahs under a program on "Democracy and Civil Society." The approximate cost of this program was \$250,000 (12,575,000 afghani).

The United States provided assistance for the cultural preservation of the Mullah Mohamood Mosque and the Shah Shaheed Shrine and granted money to sponsor, in cooperation with the Ministry of Hajj and Religion and a local NGO, a five-day conference in the fall of 2005 focusing on the role of the ulema (religious leaders) in the modernization and development of a democratic country. The conference helped to develop strategies for them to work with the Government. Over sixty religious leaders from across the country attended the conference as well as professors and scholars from Turkey, Egypt, and Pakistan.

In total, the U.S. military provided assistance to rehabilitate approximately fifty mosques during the period covered by this report.

During fiscal year 2003, the United States provided \$600,000 (30,180,000 afghani) for technical assistance and capacity building for the AIHRC. The United States provided an additional \$5 million (215 million afghani) to the commission during fiscal years 2004-2005 and committed \$2 million (98,500,000 afghani) for fiscal year 2006.

U.S. government officials supported efforts during the 2003 Constitutional Loya Jirga to include specific language in the draft constitution to provide for equal rights for men and women and to incorporate moderate language on Islam.

The U.S. government has also worked with civil society organizations to promote religious tolerance. The Civil Development Foundation, a group of reformist, largely Shi'a citizens, continued to publish the monthly magazine, *Democracy*, a project funded by a U.S. grant of \$68,843 (3,390,517 afghani) to cover expenses from July 2004 to April 2005. One of the goals of *Democracy* was to challenge "religious despotism" and to promote a liberal and tolerant interpretation of Islam.

Other U.S. grants also helped to establish independent community and commercial radio stations throughout the country that broadcast programs on a range of topics including democracy and human rights concerns. During this reporting period, the United States assisted with the completion of independent community based radio networks and invested in training and business plan development for sustainable independent media organizations. The United States helped create thirty-five independent, community-based radio stations. U.S. assistance helped renovate and expand local radio stations throughout the country, especially in the south, where media freedom was severely restricted. The United States funded three new FM facilities in the Afghanistan/Pakistan border region, a critical area because of religious extremism.

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