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Afghanistan Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998

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AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan in 1998 continued to experience civil war and political instability. There was no functioning central government. The Pashtun-dominated ultra-conservative Islamic movement known as the Taliban controlled 85 percent of the country, including Kabul, the capital and largest city. In 1997 the Taliban changed the name of the country to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, with Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, as head of state and commander of the faithful. There is a six-member ruling council in Kabul but ultimate authority for Taliban rule rested in the Taliban's inner Shura (Council), located in the southern city of Kandahar, and in Mullah Omar. Territories previously held in the north and center of the country by General Abdul Rashid Dostam, an ethnic Uzbek, and by the Hezb-i-Wahdat, led by Usted Karim Khalili, of the Shi'a Hazara ethnic minority, fell to Taliban forces during the year. Mazar-i-Sharif, the last major city to remain outside of Taliban control, fell to Taliban forces on August 8; the city of Bamiyan fell to the Taliban on September 13. Former President Burhanuddin Rabbani claimed to be the head of the Government and controlled most of the country's embassies abroad and retained Afghanistan's United Nations seat after the U.N. General Assembly deferred a decision on Afghanistan's credentials. Rabbani and his military commander, Ahmed Shah Masood, both Tajiks, continued to control some largely ethnic Tajik territory in the country's northeast. However, Masood's forces remained within rocket range of Taliban-held Kabul. As of year's end, the Taliban and Masood's forces continued to battle on multiple fronts. Several provincial administrations maintained limited functions but civil institutions were mostly nonexistent. There is no constitution, rule of law, or independent judiciary.

The U.N. Special Envoy to Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, engaged in extensive discussions with the Afghan parties and other interested nations. A group of representatives from the six nations bordering Afghanistan plus the United States and Russia met in New York in September to look at ways to end the conflict. Iran, which was angered by the killing of Iranian diplomats by Taliban forces in Mazar-i-Sharif in August and the defeat of its Shi'a allies, massed troops on its Afghan border during September and October, but refrained from direct incursions into Afghan territory.

The Taliban remained the country's primary military force, and Taliban members committed numerous serious human rights abuses.

Agriculture, including high levels of opium poppy cultivation, was the mainstay of the economy. Afghanistan remained the second largest opium producer in the world. Lack of resources and the war have impeded reconstruction of irrigation systems, repair of market roads, and replanting of orchards in some areas. The presence of an estimated 5 to 7 million land mines has restricted areas for cultivation and slowed the return of refugees who are needed to rebuild the economy. The laying of new mine fields by all sides exacerbated an already difficult situation. Trade was mainly in fruits, minerals, and gems, as well as goods smuggled to Pakistan. There are also rival currencies, both very inflated. Formal economic activity remained minimal and was inhibited by recurrent fighting and roads

blocked by local commanders. These blockages were removed in territory taken by the Taliban. Reconstruction was continuing in Herat, Kandahar, and Ghazni, areas that are under firm Taliban control. Severe earthquakes on February 4 and May 30, both centered in the northeast, caused extensive damage and loss of life. The northern areas all suffered from brigandage.

The overall human rights situation is extremely poor. Serious human rights violations continued to occur, and citizens were precluded from changing their government or choosing their leaders peacefully. There were credible reports of large-scale massacres carried out by the Taliban as they captured Mazar-i-Sharif in August. These attacks were reportedly in retaliation for the thousands of Taliban soldiers massacred by anti-Taliban forces when the anti-Taliban forces retook the city after a brief Taliban occupation in 1997. Armed units, local commanders, and rogue individuals were responsible for political killings, abductions, kidnappings for ransom, torture, rape, arbitrary detention, and looting. Prison conditions are poor. Summary justice was common. In Taliban areas, strict and oppressive order is imposed and stiff punishments for crimes prevail. The Taliban's Islamic courts and religious police, the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtues and Suppression of Vice (PVSV), enforced their extreme interpretation of Islamic punishments, such as public executions for adultery or murder and amputations of one hand and one foot for theft. For other infractions, Taliban militiamen often decided right or wrong and meted out punishments such as beatings on the spot. Various factions infringed on citizens' privacy rights. Both Taliban and anti-Taliban forces were responsible for the indiscriminate bombardment of civilian areas. Masood's forces have continued rocket attacks against Kabul. Civil war conditions and the unfettered actions of competing factions effectively limited the freedoms of speech, press, assembly, association, religion, and movement. Years of conflict have left over 300,000 Afghans as internally displaced persons, and more than 2.6 million live outside the country as refugees. Although the continued fighting has discouraged many refugees from returning to their country, 88,000 returned between January and October.

The human rights situation for women was extremely poor. Violence against women remained a problem throughout the country, and women were subjected to rape, kidnapping, and forced marriage. Trafficking in women and girls was a problem. The treatment of women and girls continued to deteriorate. There was widespread discrimination against women and girls, especially in areas under Taliban control. The Taliban imposed strict dress codes and prohibited women from working outside the home except in limited circumstances in the health care field. Girls generally were prohibited from attending school, particularly in Kabul and other urban areas. The Taliban allowed only a few girls' schools to operate in rural areas and small towns, as well as in camps for internally displaced persons at Kandahar and Herat. Worker rights were not defined. Child labor persists.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Political and Other Extrajudicial Killing

Taliban forces committed a large number of political and other extrajudicial killings. In July there were unconfirmed reports that the Taliban executed large numbers of civilians during fighting with the National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan (NIMA) in Faryab province. There also were credible reports of mass killings of civilians and prisoners by the Taliban during and after the capture of Ma-

zar-i-Sharif on August 8. Accurate statistics regarding the number of persons killed after the takeover of Mazar-i-Sharif are not available, since no foreign observers or journalists were allowed into the area and there was no investigation of the events. However, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan, Human Rights Watch, and others estimated that as many as 2,000 to 5,000 persons may have been killed by the Taliban in Mazar-i-Sharif. In the hours after the takeover, the Taliban allegedly fired at anything that moved on the streets of Mazar or on the roads leading out of the city; many civilians reportedly were killed as they tried to flee the fighting or seek shelter. There were reports that during the days following the capture of the city, Taliban fighters systematically searched for weapons and for ethnic Hazara men and boys, many of whom were beaten, killed on the spot, or arrested by the Taliban. Tajik and Uzbek males were also allegedly targeted, but to a lesser extent. The new Taliban governor of Mazar-i-Sharif, Mulla Manon Niazi, did not allow relatives of the dead to collect the bodies from the streets for days after the takeover. Many of those arrested by the Taliban reportedly were detained in local jails, and then transported to other Taliban-controlled cities, such as Shibarghan, Herat, and Kandahar. In some cases, prisoners loaded onto trucks for transport out of Mazar died en route due to asphyxiation or heat stroke. There were reports that the Taliban fired rockets on and bombed the road leading south out of the city for at least 2 days after taking Mazar, killing an unknown number of fleeing civilians.

Among those killed in the capture of Mazar-i-Sharif were eight Iranian diplomats and one Iranian journalist (see Section 2.a.). The bodies of six of the slain diplomats were returned to Iran in September, and the bodies of the other two diplomats and the journalist were returned in October. The Taliban admitted that its forces killed the diplomats, but claimed that those responsible acted on their own and would be punished by Taliban authorities.

The massacre in Mazar-i-Sharif was reportedly aimed primarily against ethnic Hazaras, who are predominantly Shi'a Muslims. The new Taliban governor reportedly gave many anti-Shia, anti-Hazara speeches around Mazar-i-Sharif, some of which were broadcast over the radio, in the days following August 8. In these speeches, he threatened the Hazaras with violence for their part in the killing of Taliban soldiers in Mazar 1 year earlier. The Taliban, who are ethnic Pashtuns and Sunni Muslims, briefly captured Mazar-i-Sharif in 1997.

On September 13, the Taliban took over the city of Bamiyan. In the fighting, an estimated 500 persons were killed, of whom an estimated 200 were civilians. There were also credible reports of massacres by Taliban commanders of 45 civilians in a village near Bamiyan in September and of 300 civilians, including women and children, along the road from Qalat-i-Ghilzai to Ghami in Zabol province in November. The Zabol province killings apparently were the work of a Taliban subgovernor in Shah Jui district, Haji Khalifa Sohaib, who robbed his victims before killing them. Sohaib reportedly was arrested after attacking a Taliban vehicle in November. These massacres and earlier mass killings from 1997 have not been investigated fully.

Amnesty International has reported that the Taliban massacred 70 ethnic Hazara civilians, including children, in Qezelabad, near Mazar-i-Sharif, in September 1997. As many as 600 civilians reportedly were killed by retreating Taliban forces in Faryab province in December 1997.

Independent investigations of these mass killings were hindered by the continuing warfare and the unwillingness of local commanders to allow investigators to visit the areas in question. The Taliban

leadership has indicated in several of these cases that investigations were under way or that investigations would be permitted. However, according to neutral observers, no real progress was made by the Taliban in facilitating investigations. The Taliban have not rejected a U.N. proposal to station a civilian monitoring unit inside Afghanistan to help investigate the killings and serve as an early warning mechanism, but the proposal had not been implemented by year's end.

Two Afghan U.N. employees were kidnaped on July 14 near Jalalabad and found murdered on July 19 and 20. The Taliban were implicated in the murder; the alleged motive for the killings was the fact that the two were former members of the Communist Party. Other former Afghan communists, in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, also were killed under circumstances that implicated the Taliban. Mohammad Hashim Paktianai, a cousin of former Afghan Communist President Najibullah (who was executed by the Taliban when they took Kabul in 1996), was killed by unidentified gunmen near his home in Peshawar on November 2.

The Taliban used swift summary trials and implemented strict punishments according to Islamic law; the Taliban ordered public executions, which sometimes took place before crowds of up to 30,000 persons at Kabul Stadium, and death by stoning (see Sections 1.c. and 1.e.).

The Taliban also used excessive force against demonstrators. On December 1, students at the Nangarhar medical college in Jalalabad reportedly protested their dean's misappropriation of hostel funds. When the dean was unable to get the students to disperse, he called his brother, Mullah Ayub, who is the commander of the local Taliban reserve force. When Mullah Ayub proved unable to convince the students to disperse willingly, he ordered his men to fire upon them. Two students reportedly were killed and several were injured. The acting governor of Nangarhar province, Mawlawi Sadr Azam, criticized the shootings. Mullah Ayub and several others reportedly were arrested. However, the dean allegedly escaped. Taliban leader Mullah Omar ordered an investigation into the incident.

During the year, Taliban planes bombed cities held by opposition forces. Opposition forces also fired rockets into Kabul on a number of occasions. In many of these attacks, civilians were killed or injured (see Section 1.g).

In other areas, combatants sought to kill rival commanders and their sympathizers. The perpetrators of these killings and their motives were difficult to identify, as political motives are often entwined with family and tribal feuds, battles over the drug trade, and personal vendettas.

There were reports that as many as 2,000 Taliban soldiers were killed by the Northern Alliance, including the Hazara Hizb-i-Wahdat, near Mazar-i-Sharif as they retreated from the city in 1997. In December 1997, a U.N. team found several mass gravesites connected with the massacre of Taliban soldiers near Mazar-i-Sharif, which contained evidence consistent with mass executions.

There were also unconfirmed reports that 10 unarmed demonstrators were killed in Mazar-i-Sharif on March 24. Forces loyal to the local Jamiat strongman, Commander Atta, allegedly shot at up to 3,000 pro-peace demonstrators. Atta may have feared that the crowd intended to storm his headquarters.

On August 21, Lieutenant Colonel Carmine Calo, an Italian serving with the United Nations Special Mission, was killed in Kabul.

b. Disappearance

The strict security enforced by the Taliban in areas under their control has resulted in a decrease in abductions, kidnappings, and hostage taking for ransom. However, there were allegations that Taliban maintained private prisons to settle personal vendettas and that they were responsible for disappearances in areas under their control. There were also credible reports that the Taliban detained hundreds of persons, mostly ethnic Hazaras, after the takeover of Mazar-i-Sharif in August; the whereabouts of many such persons was unknown at year's end (see Sections 1.a. and 1.d.). There were unconfirmed reports that some Taliban soldiers abducted girls and women from Hazara neighborhoods in Mazar-i-Sharif in August; the whereabouts of some of these women were unknown at year's end (see Section 5).

Abductions, kidnappings, and hostage taking for ransom or for political reasons occurred in non-Taliban areas, but specific information was lacking. There were unconfirmed reports that girls and local commanders were kidnapping young women. Some of the women were then reportedly forced to marry their kidnapers. Others simply remained missing. To avoid this danger, some families reportedly sent their daughters to Pakistan or to Iran.

Groups in Russia listed nearly 300 Soviet soldiers formerly serving in Afghanistan as missing in action or prisoners of war (POW's). Most were thought to be dead or to have assimilated voluntarily into Afghan society, though some are alleged to be held against their will. A number of persons from the former Soviet Union missing from the period of the Soviet occupation are presumed dead.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment

or Punishment

All Afghan factions are believed to have used torture against opponents and POW's, though specific information generally is lacking. Torture does not appear to be a routine practice in all cases.

The Taliban ruled strictly in areas that they controlled, establishing ad hoc and rudimentary judicial systems. Taliban courts imposed their extreme interpretation of Islamic law and punishments following swift summary trials. Murderers were subjected to public executions, sometimes by throat slitting, a punishment that at times was inflicted by the victims' families (see Section 1.a.). Thieves were subjected to public amputations of either one hand or one foot, or both. The U.N. Special Rapporteur for Torture was particularly concerned about the use of amputation as a form of punishment by Taliban authorities. Adulterers were stoned to death or publicly whipped with 100 lashes. Those found guilty of homosexual acts were crushed by having walls toppled over them.

Taliban forces beat women, using the pretext of immodest dress. There also were unconfirmed reports that Taliban members committed rapes (see Section 5).

Some of Masood's commanders in the north reportedly used torture routinely to extract information from and break the will of prisoners and political opponents.

Prison conditions are poor. Prisoners held by some factions are not given food, as normally this is the responsibility of prisoners' relatives, who are allowed to visit to provide them with food once or twice a week. Those who have no relatives have to petition the local council or rely on other inmates. Prisoners live in collective cells.

There are credible reports that torture occurred occasionally in prisons under the control of both the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. Local authorities maintain prisons in territories under their control and established torture cells in some of them. The Taliban operate prisons in Kandahar, Herat, Kabul, Jalalabad, Mazar-i-Sharif, Pul-i-Khumri, Shibarghan, and Maimana. Masood maintains prisons in Panjshir and Taloqan, and there also is a prison in the north at Faizabad, in Badakhshan province. According to Amnesty International, there have been reports that some Taliban prisoners held by Masood were forced to labor in life-threatening conditions, such as digging trenches in mined areas.

During 1998, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) registered almost 4,400 prisoners of war across the country. Intensified fighting and poor security for foreign personnel limited the ICRC's ability to monitor prison conditions, especially in and around Mazar-i-Sharif after that city fell to the Taliban. However, the ICRC's access improved toward the end of the year. The ICRC visited approximately 8,000 detainees in 50 different places of detention in 1998.

d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

With the absence of formal legal and law enforcement institutions, justice was not administered according to formal legal codes, and persons were subjected to arbitrary detention. There are credible reports that both Taliban and Northern Alliance militia extorted bribes from civilians in return for their release from prison or freedom from arrest. Judicial and police procedures varied from locality to locality. Little is known about the procedures for taking persons into custody and bringing them to justice. In both Taliban and non-Taliban areas, the practices varied depending on the locality, the local commanders, and other authorities. Some areas have a more formal judicial structure than others.

There are reliable reports that individuals were detained by both the Taliban and Northern Alliance because of their ethnic origins and suspected sympathy with opponents. Ethnic Hazara, who are overwhelmingly Shi'a, reportedly were targeted in particular by the overwhelmingly Sunni and ethnic Pashtun Taliban forces.

There were reports of mass arrests by the Taliban in Hazara neighborhoods of Kabul in January, and in Mazar-i-Sharif in August, where Taliban commanders reportedly conducted systematic house-to-house searches in Hazara areas (see Section 1.a.). The Taliban reportedly took hundreds of noncombatants prisoner after their capture of Mazar-i-Sharif, apparently for use as hostages.

The Taliban also detained dozens of Iranians captured during the takeover of Mazar. Iranian prisoners held by the Taliban were returned to Iran by the end of October with ICRC assistance.

In October there were reports that the Taliban arrested dozens of persons in Jalalabad; estimates ranged from 25 to 400 persons detained. Those detained allegedly were arrested for planning to carry out a coup or other activities against the Taliban; however, the arrests appeared to be aimed at possible opposition figures and included tribal elders, intellectuals, members of various parties or groups, and

persons associated with prior regimes. Some of those detained allegedly were released after a few days when no evidence could be found against them.

All factions probably hold political detainees, but no firm numbers are available. Thousands of prisoners of war are held by the Taliban and Masood. The Taliban claimed to have freed thousands of prisoners during the past few years. Masood reportedly holds a number of Pakistanis, along with several hundred Taliban soldiers, as POW's. Prisoner releases by all factions occurred during the year, often with the assistance of the ICRC. Generally, small numbers of prisoners were released at any given time. However, on July 21, the ICRC assisted in an exchange of 140 prisoners between Masood and the Taliban. An independent Afghan entrepreneur, Syed Jalal, also successfully brokered the release of at least 500 prisoners held by the two sides. On December 5, to mark the month of Ramadan, the Taliban unilaterally released 118 mostly elderly men from Pul-i-Charkhi prison in Kabul.

There was no information available on forced exile.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

With no functioning nationwide judicial system, many municipal and provincial authorities relied on some interpretation of Shari'a (Islamic) law and traditional tribal codes of justice.

The Taliban have Islamic courts in areas under their control to judge criminal cases and resolve disputes. These courts meted out punishments including execution and amputation. These courts reportedly heard cases in sessions that lasted only a few minutes. The courts reportedly dealt with all complaints, relying on the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law and punishments as well as traditional tribal customs (see Section 1.c.). In cases involving murder and rape, convicted prisoners generally were ordered executed, although relatives of the victim could instead choose to accept other restitution (see Section 1.a.). Decisions of the courts were reportedly final.

Little is known about the administration of justice in the areas controlled by Rabbani/Masood in the north. The administration and implementation of justice varied from area to area and depended on the whims of local commanders or other authorities, who summarily execute, torture, and mete out punishments without reference to any other authority.

All factions probably hold political prisoners, but no firm estimates of numbers are available.

f. Arbitrary Interference With Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

Interfactional fighting often resulted in the homes and businesses of civilians being invaded and looted by the opposing forces--whether victor or loser. Armed gunmen reportedly acted with impunity given the absence of any legal protection from the law or a responsive police force. It also was unclear what authority controlled the actions of the Taliban militiamen who patrolled the streets of cities and towns. A number of incidents were reported in which Taliban soldiers or persons masquerading as Taliban entered private homes without prior notification or informed consent in Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, and elsewhere. In Kabul, the soldiers allegedly were searching homes for evidence of cooperation with the former authorities or for violations of Taliban religious-based decrees, including the ban on the possession of depictions of living things (photographs, stuffed animals, dolls, etc.).

Members of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtues and Suppression of Vice, the Taliban's religious police, beat individuals on the streets for infractions of Taliban rules concerning dress, hair length, and facial hair, as well as for the violation of the prohibition on women being in the company of men who were unrelated to them. The Taliban required women to wear a burqa, a shroud-like outer garment that completely covers a woman from head to toe, when in public (see Section 5). Men are required to have beards of a certain length, not to trim their beards, and to wear head coverings. Men whose beards did not conform to the guidelines on beard length set out by the Taliban were subject to imprisonment for 10 days and mandatory Islamic instruction. The Taliban also reportedly have required parents to give their children "Islamic" names.

There were reports that some prisoners of the Taliban, including young sons of families that had opposed Taliban social restrictions, had been drafted forcibly and sent to the front. In January there were unconfirmed reports that the Taliban, in attempting to conscript forcibly young men in the Arghandab district near Kandahar, sparked low-level armed resistance among local residents. There were also unconfirmed reports in 1997 that youths were rounded up and sent into combat.

In August the Taliban prohibited satellite dishes, as part of an effort to ban music, television, and movies (see section 2.a.).

There have been reported instances of the forcible expulsion of persons on ethnic grounds (see Section 5).

g. Use of Excessive Force and Violations of Humanitarian Law

In Internal Conflicts

In August the Taliban captured Mazar-i-Sharif. There were reports that as many as 5,000 persons, mostly ethnic Hazara civilians, were massacred by the Taliban after the takeover of Mazar. On September 13, the Taliban took over the city of Bamiyan. In the fighting, an estimated 200 civilians were killed. There were also credible reports of a massacre by Taliban commanders of 45 civilians in a village near Bamiyan in September (see Section 1.a.).

In February Taliban planes dropped six bombs on Taloqan, reportedly killing 17 civilians. Taliban jets bombed Pul-i-Khumri on March 29; the Northern Alliance claimed that five persons were killed. In May the Taliban bombed Taloqan again, with one bomb exploding in a crowded market. Thirty-one persons were killed and 50 were injured, according to press reports. In August Taliban air raids against Bamiyan allegedly killed 13 persons and injured many more. In October Taliban planes bombed Charikar, killing 10 members of 1 family and wounding several other persons. On November 11, the Taliban bombed Taloqan yet another time, in the heaviest bombardment of the city to date.

Amnesty International has reported on an alleged massacre of some 70 civilians of the Hazara ethnic group, including children, by Taliban forces in Qezelabad, near Mazar-i-Sharif, also in 1997. Retreating Taliban forces in Faryab province in late 1997 reportedly killed some 600 civilians. There were also killings of civilians and prisoners by the Taliban as they advanced in Faryab province and captured Mazar-i-Sharif in August. Multiple witnesses reported a killing spree on the initial day of the Ta-

liban's invasion of Mazar-i-Sharif, with Taliban soldiers shooting anything that moved on the streets, including men, women, children, and animals.

In general, independent investigations of alleged killings were hindered by continuing warfare and the unwillingness of local commanders to allow investigators to visit the areas in question (see Section 1.a.). The Taliban denied charges that its forces massacred or committed atrocities against civilians and claimed that civilian deaths, if any, resulted from combat.

Masood's forces, the Jamiat-i-Islami, fired rockets on Kabul on a number of occasions, including on February 3 and 4, May 22, June 3 and 25, September 20, and December 13. Noncombatants were killed in most of these attacks. In May, eight persons reportedly were injured in a rocket attack. On June 3, six persons were killed and several reportedly were injured. On September 20, the bloodiest attack, three rockets hit the city, with each rocket causing casualties. One of these three rockets hit the crowded residential area of Kart-i-Parwan and reportedly killed over 100 persons. More than 25 persons were killed in the December attack. The apparent objective of the attacks was the airport, which the Taliban were using for both military and civilian purposes. In March warring Northern Alliance factions in Mazar-i-Sharif pounded each other's positions inside the city with heavy artillery; Afghan news sources reported that some civilians tried to flee.

The discovery of mass graves near Shibarghan in the northern part of the country in 1997 was widely reported. The graves allegedly contained 2,000 corpses, reportedly those of Taliban forces captured near Mazar-i-Sharif in mid-1997 and executed by Northern Alliance forces.

The Taliban-imposed blockade of food and other supplies bound for the Hazarajat region ruled by Hezb-i-Wahdat caused severe suffering among the 1 million inhabitants of the region (see Section 2.d.). Many families left the area following the Taliban's refusal to lift the blockade, further adding to the problem of internal displacement. The U.N. succeeded in delivering some food after the Taliban loosened their blockade of the area in May, although the Taliban have been accused by the U.N. of plundering these food aid stocks immediately after their takeover of the region. The U.N. conducted a mission to Bamiyan in November to assess the food situation and to press the Taliban for return of the looted supplies.

There were reports during the year that Masood's commanders in the northeast were "taxing" humanitarian assistance entering Afghanistan from Tajikistan, harassing NGO workers, obstructing aid convoys, and otherwise hindering the movement of humanitarian aid (see Section 4).

Over 300,000 Afghans remain internally displaced following years of fighting. More than 2.6 million others have sought refuge abroad.

The Afghan countryside remains plagued by an estimated 5 to 7 million land mines sown during and since the Soviet occupation. The mines covered an estimated 707 square kilometers at the end of 1998, causing injuries, restricting areas available for cultivation, and slowing the return of refugees. The laying of new mine fields by both sides exacerbated an already difficult situation. From 1995 to 1997 new mines are believed to have been laid over 150 square kilometers of land, reportedly mostly by the Northern Alliance. An estimated 400,000 Afghans have been killed or wounded by the mines. Approximately 80 percent of the land mine casualties are civilian and 40 to 50 percent are women.

and children. Casualties are estimated at 10 to 12 per day caused by land mines or unexploded ordnance. With funding from international donors, the United Nations has organized and trained mine detection and clearance teams, which operate throughout the country. Nevertheless, the mines are expected to pose a threat for many years. In 1997 the 4,000 mine clearers suffered from an accident rate of 1 per week. However, clearance rates and safety have increased for clearance teams assisted by dogs. There were reports of some continuing mine laying by warring factions, although the head of the Taliban, Mullah Omar, reportedly banned the use, production, trade, and stockpiling of mines in October. U.N. agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) have instituted a number of mine awareness campaigns and educational programs for women and children in various parts of the country, but many were curtailed as a result of Taliban restrictions on women and girls. On October 23, it was reported that 41 persons were killed on the way to a wedding when the truck they were riding in hit a mine on an uncleared road in Kandahar.

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

There are no laws that effectively provide for freedom of speech and of the press.¹ Senior officials of various warring factions allegedly attempted to intimidate journalists and influence their reporting. The few newspapers in the country, all of which were published only sporadically, were for the most part affiliated with different factions. Various factions maintain their own communications facilities. The Taliban selectively ban the entry of foreign newspapers into their territory. Many foreign books are prohibited. The Taliban radio station, the Voice of Shariat, broadcasts religious programming and Taliban pronouncements.

All factions have attempted to pressure foreign journalists who report on the Afghan conflict. The Taliban initially cooperated with members of the international press who arrived in Kabul, but later imposed restrictions upon them. During the year, foreign journalists were forbidden to film or photograph persons or animals, were not allowed to interview women, and were required to be accompanied at all times by a Taliban escort to ensure that these restrictions were enforced. Foreign journalists were not permitted into Mazar-i-Sharif after the Taliban took the city in August. In 1997 Abdurrahman Hotaqi, the Taliban's Deputy Minister of Information, warned foreign journalists that the Taliban would not tolerate "biased and false analysis".

The Taliban reportedly require most journalists to stay at the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul (allegedly for security and economic reasons). Journalists also reported that the Taliban attempted to control who could act as drivers and interpreters for journalists.

In August Iranian journalist Mahmoud Saremi was killed after being abducted in Mazar-i-Sharif by Taliban soldiers (see Section 1.a). Saremi was the Afghanistan bureau chief for the official Iranian news agency, IRNA. Taliban officials stated that those responsible for Saremi's killing were not acting under official orders and would be punished.

On October 30, five foreigners were arrested in Kandahar for taking photographs of the home of Taliban leader Mullah Omar.

The Taliban continue to prohibit music, movies, and television on religious grounds. In August television sets, videocassette recorders, videocassettes, audiocassettes, and satellite dishes were outlawed in order to enforce the prohibition.

The Taliban severely restrict academic freedom, particularly education for girls (see Section 5).

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

Civil war, tenuous security, and likely opposition from local authorities seriously inhibited freedom of assembly and association.

It is unknown whether laws exist that govern the formation of associations. Many domestic NGO's continue to operate in the country, and many international NGO's, some without their foreign staff, also continue to operate in the country (see Section 4). There were reports that the Taliban require NGO's to go through burdensome registration procedures in order to be allowed to operate, and attempted to exert control over NGO staffing and office locations, especially in Kabul.

c. Freedom of Religion

Freedom of religion is restricted severely, and Taliban members vigorously enforced their interpretation of Islamic law. Afghanistan's official name, according to both the Taliban (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan) and the Northern Alliance (the Islamic State of Afghanistan), reflects the desire of the factions to promote Islam as a state religion. Some 85 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, and Shi'a Muslims constitute most of the remainder. The Hazara ethnic group is predominantly Shi'a; Shi'as are among the most economically disadvantaged persons in the country. The Shi'a minority want a national government to give them equal rights as citizens. There are reports that the Taliban have occupied and "cleaned" Shi'a mosques for the use of Sunnis.

The Taliban sought to impose their extreme interpretation of Islamic observance in areas that they control. Prayer is mandatory for all, and those who are observed not praying at appointed times or who are late attending prayer are subject to punishment with severe beatings. Members of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtues and Suppression of Vice, which was raised to the status of a ministry in May, regularly check passersby to see that men's beards and apparel meet Taliban requirements, to ensure that women are dressed in strict traditional Taliban-approved garb, and to ascertain that women are not in the company of men who are unrelated to them (see Section 5). There were reports that the PVSV members in Kabul stopped persons on the street and quizzed them to determine if they knew how to recite various Koranic prayers. According to regulations, a man who has shaved or cut his beard may be imprisoned. Beards must protrude farther than would a fist clamped at the base of the chin. Several civil service employees reportedly were fired in 1997 for cutting their beards. All students at Kabul University are reportedly required to have beards in order to study there (no female students are allowed). There also are credible reports that Taliban members gave forced haircuts to males in Kabul. Enforcement of Taliban social strictures is much stricter in the cities, especially Kabul. The Taliban have declared that all Muslims must abide by the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law.

The small number of non-Muslim residents in Afghanistan may practice their faith, but may not proselytize. Almost all of the country's small Hindu and Sikh population, which once numbered about 50,000, has emigrated or taken refuge abroad. There were reports that Hindus are now required to wear a piece of yellow cloth attached to their clothing to identify their religious identity; Sikhs reportedly were required to wear some form of identification as well. This rule allegedly was imposed to spare non-Muslims from the enforcement of rules that are mandatory for Muslims and from harassment by the PVSU.

In November Taliban officials accepted responsibility for the defacing of one of two historic statues of Buddha near Bamiyan during their takeover of that city in August. The Taliban claimed that the vandalism was the result of an unauthorized act by one of their soldiers, and that the statues were being protected by the Taliban from further harm. In 1997, there was a report that a Christian church in Kabul was taken over by Taliban authorities and turned into a mosque. Some Taliban leaders claimed tolerance of religious minorities, although there reportedly have been restrictions imposed upon Shi'a Muslims in Taliban-controlled territory, though not on a uniform basis.

d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel,

Emigration, and Repatriation

Although in principle citizens have the right to travel freely both inside and outside the country, their ability to travel within the country was hampered by warfare, brigandage, millions of land mines, a road network in a state of disrepair, and limited domestic air service, complicated by factional threats to air traffic. The Taliban's restrictions on women further curtail freedom of movement (see Section 5). Despite these obstacles, many persons continued to travel relatively freely, with buses plying routes in most parts of the country. However, due to intermittent fighting in various areas, international aid agencies often found that their ability to travel, work, and distribute assistance was hampered. International travel continued to be difficult as both the Taliban and Masood threatened to shoot down any planes that flew over areas of the country that they controlled, without their permission.

Commercial trade was impeded in certain non-Taliban areas, as local commanders continued to demonstrate their control over the roads by demanding road tolls and sometimes closing roads. The Taliban enforced a blockade of food and other supplies bound for the Hazarajat region of central Afghanistan, but allowed limited humanitarian shipments beginning in May and abandoned the blockade when the regional capital, Bamiyan, came under Taliban control in August. There was increasing evidence throughout the year that some Taliban commanders, who previously gained popularity by sweeping away the checkpoints that local warlords used to shake down travelers, are setting up checkpoints themselves and demanding tolls for passage.

There also have been instances of the forcible expulsion of individuals on ethnic grounds. During the year, there were reports of forced expulsions of ethnic Hazaras and Tajiks from areas newly occupied by the Taliban.

Afghans continued to form one of the world's largest refugee populations. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, about 2.6 million Afghans remain outside the country as registered refugees: 1.4 million in Iran, 1.2 million in Pakistan, 20,000 in Russia, 17,000 in India, and

9,000 in the central Asian republics. Women and children constitute 75 percent of the refugee population. In addition, there are more than 300,000 Afghans who are internally displaced following years of fighting. A total of 4,069,000 Afghan refugees have been repatriated since 1988, with over 1.5 million returning to Afghanistan in the peak year of 1992. Although the continued fighting has discouraged many refugees from returning to their country, 88,000 returned between January and October.

There was no available information on policies regarding refugees, asylum, provision of first asylum, or the forced return of refugees.

Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

There was no functioning central government in the country. The continuing struggle for political power among the major armed groups prevented citizens from changing their government or choosing their leaders peacefully and democratically. Most political changes came about through shifting military fortunes. No faction held elections or respected citizen's right to change their government democratically.

The Taliban movement's authority emanates from its leader, Mullah Omar, who carries the title Commander of the Faithful. Governmental functions are exercised through the key Taliban governing body, the Inner Shura (Council) based in Kandahar, and by ministries based in Kabul.

The Northern Alliance, headed by nominal President Rabbani, holds power with de facto Defense Minister Masood as Rabbani's primary military backer. Rabbani received nominal support from General Dostam, and the Shi'a/Hazara Hezb-i-Wahdat, before their forces were defeated by the Taliban during the year. Rabbani and Masood control the northeastern, largely Tajik, portion of the country, including the strategic Panjshir valley north of Kabul.

Discontent with the Taliban's strictures and rural village values was strong in large, non-Pashtun cities such as Herat and Kabul, and in the cities controlled by the Taliban in the north. The Taliban's military successes did not encourage the group's leaders to engage meaningfully in political dialog with opponents. Efforts to convene a national body of Muslim scholars (ulema) to discuss the future of the country broke down when both the Taliban and the Northern Alliance disagreed over the possible membership and sequence of the talks. Peace talks convened in April in Islamabad, Pakistan broke down quickly. Moderate and neutral Afghans, mostly living outside of the country, continue their efforts to organize a traditional Grand National Assembly (loya jirga), and held a meeting in Germany in July. Other expatriate Afghan moderates have attempted to enlist the former King in this process.

The United Nations and the international community continued their efforts to help Afghans reach a political settlement.

Section 4 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

There are many NGO's, both domestic and international, in the country. Some are based in neighboring countries, mostly Pakistan, with branches inside Afghanistan; others are based in Afghan cities. The focus of their activities is primarily humanitarian assistance, rehabilitation, health, education, and agriculture.

There was harassment of domestic and international NGO's by all factions. The Taliban have interfered consistently with the operation of the United Nations and NGO's. Tactics used have included threatening to impound the vehicles of NGO's that do not work on projects preferred by the Taliban, threatening to close projects down that do not include a Taliban member as a supervisor, and, in the case of one domestic NGO, detaining the NGO's director and impounding all of its equipment in order to get the NGO to surrender its equipment, hire Taliban members, and cede half of the seats on its board to the Taliban. The Taliban announced in March that foreign Muslim women, including U.N. workers, would be allowed to perform their jobs only if accompanied by a male relative, a move that hampered NGO and relief operations. The United Nations withdrew its personnel from southern Afghanistan in late March to protest the assault of a U.N. worker by the Taliban governor of Kandahar province and the interference with its work by the Taliban. After reaching agreements with local officials, the U.N. returned to Kandahar in May. In April Taliban authorities rejected the participation of U.N. Humanitarian Coordinator Alfredo Witschi-Cestari on the U.N. team selected to negotiate with the Taliban on the travel restrictions for foreign Muslim women and other issues, because he was perceived to be "anti-Taliban".

On June 30, the Taliban insisted that Kabul NGO's abandon their offices and move to a single location in a bomb damaged former school, which had no electricity or running water. Those who refused were threatened with expulsion from the country. However, the relocation was not enforced by the Taliban before foreign U.N. and NGO staff left the country in August due to security concerns. In June and July, several Afghan workers for international NGO's were detained for questioning by the Taliban; most were released within a few days. On July 14, two Afghan U.N. workers were abducted by unidentified persons in Jalalabad; their bodies were found on July 19 and 20. One of the bodies bore signs of torture (see Section 1.a). On August 21, Lieutenant Colonel Carmine Calo, an Italian serving with the United Nations Special Mission, was killed in Kabul (see Section 1.a.), triggering the departure of most foreign U.N. and NGO staff. Some Afghan staff remained to carry out humanitarian operations. In November the U.N. World Food Program (UNWFP), which distributes food aid, accused the Taliban of looting 1,500 metric tons of food, stealing 6 trucks from the UNWFP's compound in Bamiyan, and occupying UNWFP offices in Bamiyan and Yakaolang. That same month, the Taliban agreed to a visit by the U.N. to Bamiyan to discuss the situation. The visit took place on November 23-24.

For much of the year, Northern Alliance and autonomous commanders also prevented NGO's and international organizations from delivering humanitarian assistance from the north to Bamiyan by road, despite the fact that the area was suffering from a Taliban-imposed blockade. There are credible reports that Masood-affiliated commanders obstructed NGO's and international organizations in delivering humanitarian assistance in the northeastern provinces of Badakhshan and Takhar; they allegedly "taxed" or overcharged for the delivery of humanitarian supplies across the Amu Darya river from Tajikistan, laid new land mines on the roads, and blew up a bridge used by NGO's to deliver assistance to Badakhshan. Occasionally, local commanders held up convoys and aid workers.

The Afghan League of Human Rights operated both in Afghanistan and Pakistan; it produces an annual report. The Cooperation Center for Afghanistan (CCA) is an Afghan NGO that operated

in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. The CCA maintains an office in Peshawar, where it produces a monthly newsletter on the Afghan human rights situation. It also monitors and documents the human rights situation from several offices in both Taliban-controlled and Northern Alliance controlled cities. The National Commission on Human Rights in Afghanistan began operations during the year in Pakistan, conducting seminars on human rights issues, issuing press statements criticizing specific instances of human rights abuses, and placing articles in Pashtu and Dari newspapers. The Afghanistan Commission for Human Rights, founded in 1997 after discussions with Taliban authorities on Islamic aspects of human rights, also started activities in Pakistan, focused on the plight of Afghan prisoners in Pakistani prisons and on children's rights. However, the civil war and lack of security continued to make it difficult for human rights organizations to monitor adequately the situation inside Afghanistan.

Section 5 Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Religion, Disability, Language, or Social Status

There is no functioning constitution, and therefore there are no constitutional provisions that prohibit or protect against discrimination based on race, sex, religion, disability, language, or social status. It is not known whether specific laws prohibit discrimination; local custom and practices generally prevail. Discrimination against women is

prevalent throughout the country, and its severity varies from area to area, depending on the local leadership's attitude towards work and education for women and on local attitudes. Historically, the minority Shi'a faced discrimination from the majority Sunni population. There has been greater acceptance of the disabled as the number of persons maimed by land mines increased and the presence of the disabled became more widespread.

Women

As lawlessness and interfactional fighting continued in some areas, violence against women occurred frequently, including beatings, rapes, forced marriages, disappearances, kidnappings, and killings. Such incidents generally went unreported and most information was anecdotal. It was difficult to document rapes, in particular, in view of the social stigma that surrounds the problem. Although the stability instituted by the Taliban in most of the country initially acted to reduce violence against women, Taliban members continued to beat women, using the pretext of immodest dress. There were also unconfirmed reports that Taliban soldiers raped and abducted women from Hazara neighborhoods in Mazar-i-Sharif in August; the whereabouts of some of these women were unknown at year's end. The enforced seclusion of women within the home greatly limited the information available on domestic violence and marital rape. In a climate of secrecy and impunity, it is likely that domestic violence against women remained a serious problem.

Women accused of adultery offenses also are subjected to violence. At least one accused adulteress was sentenced to 100 lashes; her sentence was carried out publicly (see Section 1.c.).

Beginning under the monarchy in the 1960's, and at an increasing pace under President Mohammed Daoud in the 1970's and the Communist regime in the 1980's, a growing number of women, particularly in urban areas, worked outside of the home in nontraditional roles as doctors, nurses, and teachers. This trend was reversed when the Communists were ousted in 1992 and an Islamic government was installed. Since the advent of the Taliban in 1994, the trend towards excluding women from employment has intensified, and only a few women worked as artisans, weavers, doctors, and nurses in some areas outside of Taliban control. Girls' schools also remained open in areas outside of Taliban control.

The treatment of women under Taliban rule has been particularly harsh. When the Taliban took Kabul in September 1996, they immediately issued pronouncements forbidding girls to go to school and forbidding women to work, including female doctors and nurses in hospitals. In a few cases, the Taliban relented and allowed women to work in health care occupations under restricted circumstances. The prohibition on women working outside of the home has been especially difficult for the large numbers of widows left by 20 years of civil war; there are an estimated 30,000 widows in Kabul alone. Many women reportedly have been reduced to selling all of their possessions and to begging to feed their families. Taliban gender restrictions continued to interfere with the delivery of humanitarian assistance to women and girls, as well. In 1997 the Taliban asked that international assistance be provided to women through their close male relatives rather than directly. Male relatives also must obtain the permission of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtues and Suppression of Vice for female home-based employment.

While most Afghans lack any access to adequate medical facilities, such access was made even more restrictive for women under Taliban rule. In 1997 the Taliban announced a policy of segregating men and women in hospitals and directed most hospitals in Kabul to cease services to women and to discharge female staff. Services for women were to be provided by a single hospital still partially under construction--a drastic reduction in access to, and the quality of, health care for women. Several orders concerning the provision of emergency and non-emergency medical aid for women were given and reversed in 1997. Women were permitted to seek treatment from female medical personnel working in designated women's wards or clinics; they were permitted to see male doctors if accompanied by a male relative. Erratic reversals in policy continued throughout 1998, with the effect that women often were prevented from obtaining adequate medical care. On June 25, the Taliban prohibited all doctors from treating female patients in the absence of the woman's husband, father, or brother. This decree, while not universally enforced, made treatment extremely difficult for Kabul's widows, many of whom have lost all such male family members. Further, even when a woman is allowed to be treated by a male doctor, he may not see or touch her, which drastically limits the possibility of any meaningful treatment. Health care for both men and women also was hampered by the ban on images of humans, which caused the destruction of public education posters and hampered the provision and dissemination of health information in a society with massive illiteracy.

In 1998 Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) conducted a survey of 160 Afghan women in Kabul and in Pakistan, and found that 77 percent reported poor access to health care in Kabul, while another 20 percent reported no access at all. Of those surveyed, 71 percent reported a decline in their physical condition over the last 2 years. In addition, there was also a significant decline in the mental health of the women surveyed. Of the participants, 81 percent reported a decline in their mental condition; 97 percent met the diagnostic criteria for depression; 86 percent showed symptoms of anxiety; 42 per-

cent met the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder; and 21 percent reported having suicidal thoughts "extremely often" or "quite often." There have been unconfirmed reports that the suicide rate among women in Kabul has increased significantly since the Taliban takeover of the city.

The Taliban decreed what women could wear in public. Women were forced to don a head-to-toe garment known as the burqa, which has only a mesh screen for vision. While in some rural areas this was the normal garment for women, the requirement to wear the burqa represented a significant change in practice when imposed in urban areas. According to a decree announced by the religious police in 1997, women found outside the home who were not covered properly would be punished severely along with their family elders. In Kabul and elsewhere women found in public who were not wearing the burqa, or whose burqas did not properly cover their ankles, were beaten by Taliban militiamen. Some poor women cannot afford the cost of a burqa, and thus are forced to remain at home or risk beatings if they go out without one. The lack of a burqa has resulted in the inability of some women to get necessary medical care; at least one woman reportedly died because she did not have a burqa and thus could not leave her home. In its survey, PHR found that 22 percent of the respondents reported being detained and abused by the Taliban; of these incidents, 72 percent were related to alleged infractions of the Taliban's dress code for women. Most of these incidents reportedly resulted in detentions that lasted 1 hour or less, but 84 percent also resulted in public beatings' and 2 percent resulted in torture. Sixty-eight percent of those surveyed reported that they had drastically reduced their public activities during the past year in Kabul. A few reports in 1997 indicated that some women in Herat cover their heads with large scarves that leave the face uncovered and have not faced reprisals, and many women in rural areas also have been observed without burqas but with scarves covering their heads. Women are not allowed to wear white burqas, white socks or white shoes. Women reportedly were beaten if their shoe heels clicked when they walk. All of these restrictions apparently are not enforced strictly upon the nomad population of several hundred thousand or upon the few female foreigners, who nonetheless must cover their hair, arms and legs. Women in their homes must not be visible from the street; the Taliban require that houses with female occupants have their windows painted over.

Women were expected to leave their homes only while escorted by a male relative, further curtailing the appearance and movement of women in public even when wearing approved clothing. Women appearing in public without a male relative ran the risk of beatings by the Taliban. Some observers reported seeing fewer and fewer women on the streets in Taliban-controlled areas. Women are not allowed to drive, and taxi drivers reportedly are beaten if they take unescorted women as passengers. Women only may ride on buses designated as women's buses; there are reportedly not enough such buses to meet the demand, and the wait for women's buses can be long. In December the Taliban ordered that bus drivers who take female passengers must encase the bus in curtains, and put up a curtain so that the female passengers cannot see or be seen by the driver. Bus drivers also were told that they must employ boys under the age of 15 to collect fares from female passengers, and that neither the drivers nor the fare collectors were to mingle with the passengers.

Women are also forbidden to enter mosques or other places of worship; most women pray at home, usually alone.

In September Taliban leader Mullah Omar issued edicts that outlawed tribal customs of compelling widows to marry their in-laws and forcing women to marry to settle disputes between families. He

also affirmed women's limited rights to inherit property under the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law.

In April a car carrying three foreign women allegedly was rammed intentionally by a truck bearing the white Taliban flag. In Jalalabad, Taliban officials reportedly tried to keep female journalists from walking in a public bazaar, out of concern for their safety.

Children

Local administrative bodies and international assistance organizations undertook to look out for children's welfare to the extent possible; however, the situation of children is very poor. Infant mortality is 250 out of 1,000 births and Medecins Sans Frontiers reports that 250,000 children per year die of malnutrition. The Taliban's restrictions on cross-gender medical treatment have had a detrimental effect on children. According to PHR, children sometimes are denied medical care when the authorities do not let male doctors visit children's wards, which may be located within the women's ward of a hospital, or will not allow male doctors to see children accompanied only by their mothers. A UNICEF study also reported that the majority of children are highly traumatized and expect to die before reaching adulthood. Some 90 percent have nightmares and suffer from acute anxiety, while 70 percent have seen acts of violence, including the killing of parents or relatives.

Taliban restrictions on the movement of women and girls in areas that they controlled hampered the ability of U.N. agencies and NGO's to implement effectively health and education programs aimed at both boys and girls.

The Taliban have eliminated most of the opportunities for girls' education that existed in areas that they have taken over; however, some girls' schools still operate in rural areas and small towns. More than 100 NGO-funded girls' schools and home-based women's vocational projects were closed in Kabul on June 15. The Taliban stated that schools would not be allowed to teach girls over the age of 8, and that the schools that were closed had violated this rule. In the future, the Taliban stated that it would license girl's schools, and that teaching in such schools would be limited to the Koran. Some girls reportedly are receiving an education in informal home schools, which are tolerated by the Taliban authorities in various parts of the country. It also is reported that several girls' schools remain open in Kandahar, although in Herat, which was captured by the Taliban in 1995, girls' schools have remained closed except in the refugee camps maintained by international NGO's. Some families sent girls abroad for education in order to evade the Taliban's prohibitions on females attending school in most urban areas. Prior to the Taliban takeover in 1996, more than 100,000 girls reportedly attended public school in Kabul in grades kindergarten to 12, according to a U.N. survey. It has also been reported that the ban on women working outside of the home has hampered the education of boys, since 70 percent of the country's teachers were women prior the advent of Taliban rule.

The Taliban have banned certain recreational activities, such as kite flying and playing chess. Dolls and stuffed animals are prohibited due to the Taliban's interpretation of religious injunctions against representations of living beings. Mullah Omar reportedly issued a decree in November banning young men and boys who have not yet grown a beard from fighting at the front.

People With Disabilities

There are few measures to protect the rights of the mentally and physically disabled or to mandate accessibility for them. Victims of land mines continued to be a major focus of international humanitarian relief organizations, which devoted resources to providing prostheses, medical treatment, and rehabilitation therapy to amputees. It is believed that there was more public acceptance of the disabled because of the prevalence of them due to land mines or other war-related injuries. There are reports that disabled women, who need a prosthesis or other aid to walk, are virtually homebound because they cannot wear the burqa over the prosthesis or other aid.

National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities

It is estimated that thousands of members of the ethnic Hazara minority may have been killed by the Taliban (see Section 1.a.).

There have been instances of the forcible expulsion of individuals on ethnic grounds. During the year, there were reports of forced expulsions of ethnic Hazaras and Tajiks from areas newly occupied by the Taliban.

Section 6 Worker Rights

a. The Right of Association

Little is known about labor laws and practices, although only an insignificant fraction of the work force has ever labored in an industrial setting. There were no reports of labor rallies or strikes. Labor rights are not defined, and in the context of the breakdown of governmental authority there is no effective central authority to enforce them. Many of Kabul's industrial workers are unemployed due to the destruction or abandonment of the city's minuscule manufacturing base. The only large employer in Kabul is the governmental structure of minimally functioning ministries.

Workers in government ministries reportedly have been fired because they have received part of their education abroad or because of contacts with the previous regimes, although certain officials in previous administrations still are employed under the Taliban. Others reportedly have been fired for violating Taliban regulations concerning beard length.

b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

Afghanistan lacks a tradition of genuine labor-management bargaining. There are no known labor courts or other mechanisms for resolving labor disputes.

There are no export processing zones.

c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

Little information is available on forced or compulsory labor, including child labor. There have been credible reports that Masood forced Taliban prisoners to work on road and airstrip construction projects.

d. Status of Child Labor Practices and Minimum Age for

Employment

There is no evidence that authorities in any part of the country enforce labor laws, if they exist, relating to the employment of children. Children from the ages of 6 to 14 often work to help support their families by herding animals in rural areas, and by collecting paper and firewood, shining shoes, begging, or collecting scrap metal among street debris in the cities. Some of these practices expose children to the danger of land mines.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

There is no available information regarding a statutory minimum wage or the enforcement of safe labor practices. Many workers apparently are allotted time off regularly for prayers and observance of religious holidays.

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