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Afghanistan



International Religious Freedom Report

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
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Freedom of religion is restricted severely. Due to the absence of a constitution and the ongoing civil war, freedom of religion is determined primarily by the unofficial, unwritten, and evolving policies of the warring factions. In 1999 the Taliban, the ultraconservative Islamic movement that controls approximately 90 percent of the country, claimed that it was drafting a new constitution based on Islamic law. Although a spokesperson for the Taliban claimed that the new constitution would ensure the rights of all Muslims and religious minorities, custom and law require affiliation with some religion, and atheism is punishable by death. By the end of the period covered by this report, a new constitution had not been promulgated.

The status of respect for religious freedom continued to deteriorate during the period covered by this report due to the civil war, the policies of the Taliban, and the policies of the Taliban's opponents. Repression by the Taliban of the Hazara ethnic group, which is predominantly Shi'a Muslim, was particularly severe. Although the conflict between the Hazaras and the Taliban is political and military as well as religious, and it is not possible to state with certainty that the Taliban engaged in its campaign against the Shi'a solely because of their religious beliefs, the religious affiliation of the Hazaras apparently was a significant factor leading to their repression. The Taliban sought to impose its extreme interpretation of Islamic observance in areas that it controlled and has declared that all Muslims in areas under Taliban control must abide by the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law. The Taliban relies on a religious police force under the control of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (PVPV) to enforce rules regarding appearance, dress, employment, access to medical care, behavior, religious practice, and freedom of expression. Persons found to be in violation of the edicts are subject to punishment meted out on the spot, which may include beatings, detention, or both. In practice, the rigid policies adopted both by the Taliban and by certain opposition groups affect adversely adherents of other branches of Islam and of other faiths.

Relations between the different branches of Islam in the country are difficult. Historically, the minority Shi'a faced discrimination from the majority Sunni population.

The U.S. Embassy in Kabul has been closed since 1989 for security reasons. Although the United States does not recognize any of the warring factions as the Government of Afghanistan, U.S. Government officials have raised religious freedom issues with representatives of the factions on several occasions during the period covered by this report. U.S. Government officials have made similar approaches to other governments, including countries with influence in Afghanistan.

In September 2000, the former Secretary of State identified the Taliban as a particularly severe violator of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 251,738 square miles and its population is approximately 25 million. Reliable data on the country's religious demography is not available. However, observers estimate that 85 percent of the population are Sunni Muslim; most of the remaining 15 percent are Shi'a Muslim. The Hazara ethnic group is predominantly Shi'a; Shi'a are among the most economically disadvantaged persons in the country. The Shi'a minority wants a national government that would give them equal rights as citizens. There also are small numbers of Ismailis living in the central and northern parts of the country. Ismailis are Shi'a Muslims, but consider the Aga Khan their spiritual leader.

Traditionally, Sunni Islam of the Hanafi school of jurisprudence has been the dominant religion. The Taliban also adheres to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, making it the current dominant religion in the country. For the last 200 years, Sunnis often have looked to the example of the Deoband madrassa (religious school) near Delhi, India. Most of the Taliban leadership attended Deobandi-influenced seminaries in Pakistan. The Deoband school has long sought to purify Islam by discarding supposedly un-Islamic accretions to the faith and reemphasizing the models established in the Koran and the customary practices of the Prophet

Mohammed. Additionally, Deobandi scholars often have opposed what they perceive as Western influences. Much of the population adheres to Deobandi-influenced Hanafi Sunnism, but a sizable minority adheres to a more mystical version of Hanafi Sunnism generally known as Sufism. Sufism centers on orders or brotherhoods that follow charismatic religious leaders.

The Taliban's chief opposition is the Northern Alliance, which, under the nominal leadership of Burhanuddin Rabbani, is made up of various smaller anti-Taliban groups. Rabbani and his Defense Minister, Commander Ahmad Shah Masood, are both Tajiks and control a largely Tajik-inhabited territory in the northeast. Other members of the Northern Alliance include ethnic Hazara, Uzbeks, Turkmen, and other smaller groups. Some other smaller ethnic groups are Shi'a Muslims. Within the respective factions, there are economic, political, and military advantages to belonging to the dominant faith or ethnic group in a given faction. Conversely, members of a different faith may encounter disadvantages if they seek full membership in a particular faction. The Taliban has brought several prominent Shi'a commanders into its organization in an effort to counter the perception that it is an exclusively Sunni Pashtun movement. The Northern Alliance includes several Pashtuns in prominent roles, although its supporters largely come from the non-Pashtun minorities.

In the past, small communities of Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, and Christians lived in the country; however, most members of these communities have left. Even at their peak, these non-Muslim minorities constituted only 1 percent of the population. Almost all members of the country's small Hindu and Sikh population, which once numbered about 50,000 persons, have emigrated or taken refuge abroad. Non-Muslims such as Hindus and Sikhs now number only in the hundreds, often working as traders. The few Christians and Jews who live in the country apparently are almost all foreigners who are assigned temporarily to relief work by foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGO's).

Several areas of the country are religiously homogeneous. Sunni Muslim Pashtuns, centered around the city of Kandahar, dominate the south, west, and east of the country. The homeland of the Shi'a Hazaras is in the Hazarajat or the mountainous central highlands around Bamiyan. Badakshan province, in the extreme northeast of the country, traditionally has been an Ismaili region. Other areas, including Kabul, the capital, are more heterogeneous. For example, in and around the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, there is a mix of Sunnis (including Pashtuns, Turkmen, Uzbeks, and Tajiks) and Shi'a (including Hazaras, Qizilbash, and Ismailis).

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Freedom of religion is restricted severely. Due to the absence of a constitution and the ongoing civil war, religious freedom is determined primarily by the unofficial, unwritten, and evolving policies of the warring factions. In most parts of the country, the Pashtun-dominated ultraconservative Islamic movement known as the Taliban vigorously enforced its interpretation of Islamic law. The Taliban, which controls approximately 90 percent of the country, claimed in mid-1999 that it was drafting a new constitution, based upon the sources of Islamic religious law (Shari'a): the Koran, the Sunna, and Hanafi jurisprudence. A Taliban spokesman stated that the new constitution would ensure the rights of all Muslims and of religious minorities. However, custom and law require affiliation with some religion, and atheism is considered apostasy and is punishable by death. By the end of the period covered by this report, a new constitution had not been promulgated. The small number of non-Muslim residents who remain in the country may practice their faith; however, they may not proselytize.

The country's official name, according to the Taliban, is the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan; however, according to the Northern Alliance, the umbrella organization of various smaller anti-Taliban groups, it is the Islamic State of Afghanistan. These names reflect the desire of both factions to promote Islam as the state religion. Taliban leader Mullah Omar carries the title of Commander of the Faithful.

Licensing and registration of religious groups reportedly are not required by the authorities in any part of the country.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In Taliban-controlled areas the authorities have decreed that all Muslims must take part in five daily prayers. Friday noon prayers at mosques reportedly are compulsory for Muslim men. However, women and girls reportedly are forbidden to enter mosques and therefore must pray at home.

In May 2001, according to news reports, the Taliban was considering an edict requiring Hindus to wear identifying badges on their clothing. On May 23, 2001, Taliban radio announced that the edict had been approved by religious officials; however, Mullah Omar reportedly did not sign the edict and the Taliban did not implement it by the end of the period covered by this report. The Taliban stated that the intent of the proposed edict is to protect Hindu citizens from harassment by members of the religious police. However, international observers regarded the proposed edict as part of the Taliban's efforts to segregate and isolate non-Muslim citizens, and to encourage more Hindu migration. The reactions of Hindu citizens reportedly

ranged from indifference to outrage.

According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), in September 1999, the Taliban issued decrees that forbade non-Muslims from building places of worship but allowed them to worship at existing holy sites, forbade non-Muslims from criticizing Muslims, ordered non-Muslims to identify their houses by placing a yellow cloth on their rooftops, forbade non-Muslims from living in the same residence as Muslims, and required that non-Muslim women wear a yellow dress with a special mark so that Muslims could keep their distance. These decrees followed earlier reports that Hindus were required to wear a piece of yellow cloth attached to their clothing to identify their religious identity, and that Sikhs also were required to wear some form of identification. This system of identification allegedly was imposed to spare non-Muslims from the enforcement of rules that are mandatory for Muslims and from harassment by agents of the PVPV; however, the identification system reportedly no longer is enforced.

No information is available about any activities by Muslim missionaries in the country. According to a decree issued in June 2001, proselytizing by non-Muslims is prohibited, and is punishable by death or deportation in the case of foreigners. Taliban officials subsequently stated that the decree is only a guideline. A small number of foreign Christian groups are allowed in the country to provide humanitarian assistance; however, they are forbidden to proselytize. Conversion from Islam is considered apostasy and is punishable by death. There was no information available about converts, and no information available concerning restrictions on the training of clergy.

The Taliban does not encourage free speech about religious issues or frank discussions that challenge orthodox Sunni views. Publishing and distribution of literature of any kind, including religious material, is rare. The Taliban continues to prohibit music, movies, and television on religious grounds in Taliban-controlled areas. In 1998 television sets, videocassette recorders, videocassettes, audiocassettes, and satellite dishes were outlawed in order to enforce the prohibition. However, subsequent reports indicate that many persons in urban areas around the country own such electronic devices despite the ban.

The parts of the country's educational system that have survived more than 20 years of war place considerable emphasis on religion. According to international news reports in May 2001, the Taliban issued an edict requiring all students, including those in private schools, to wear head coverings. The Taliban reportedly ordered education centers to expel any student without a head covering or face the risk of closure by the religious police.

When the Taliban took Kabul in September 1996, it immediately issued pronouncements forbidding girls to go to school. According to a United Nations survey, at that time, more than 100,000 girls reportedly attended public school in Kabul from grades kindergarten to 12. Since 1996 the Taliban has eliminated most of the opportunities for girls' education that existed in areas that the Taliban now controls; however, some girls' schools still operate in rural areas and small towns. The Taliban decreed that women are not allowed to attend the country's formerly coeducational universities, and one women's university, the Kabul branch of the Peshawar-based Afghan University, was closed by the Taliban in 1996 after it gained control of Kabul. The Taliban closed more than 100 NGO-funded girls' schools and home-based women's vocational projects in Kabul in June 1998. 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 girls' schools would be licensed, and that teaching in such schools would be limited to the Koran. However, the Taliban reportedly does not enforce this policy universally and Taliban officials reportedly tolerate informal home schools in various parts of the country. Several girls' schools reportedly remain open in Kandahar. However, with the exception of schools in the refugee camps, which are maintained by international NGO's, girls' schools remained closed in Herat, which was captured by the Taliban in 1995. Some families sent girls abroad for education in order to evade the Taliban's prohibitions on education for females in most urban areas. The ban on women working outside of the home reportedly also has hampered the education of boys, since 70 percent of the country's teachers were women before the Taliban took over most of the country.

In 1998 the Taliban announced that foreign Muslim women, including U.N. workers, would be allowed to perform their jobs only if accompanied by a male relative. Although the restriction was not enforced vigorously during the period covered by this report, some arrests were reported and the regulation disrupted the working environment for some international NGO's in the country. On July 6, 2000, the Taliban issued an edict banning women's employment (except in the health care sector) in U.N. agencies and international NGO's. On August 16, 2000, the Taliban issued an order closing down the World Food Program's (WFP) 25 widows' bakeries. However, the Taliban reversed the edict the next day after the WFP stated that the female staff of the bakeries were not direct employees of the WFP and therefore not subject to the edict. In June 2001, the bakeries were again closed due to an impasse between the Taliban and the WFP over the WFP's attempt to hire women to conduct a beneficiary survey. A compromise was reached in which the Taliban permitted the WFP to hire women through the Ministry of Public Health and allowed the bakeries to reopen.

While some Taliban leaders have claimed that the Taliban is tolerant of religious minorities, it reportedly has imposed some restrictions upon Shi'a Muslims in Taliban-controlled territory. For example, the Taliban allegedly orders Shi'a Muslims to confine their Ashura commemorations during the month of Muharram to their mosques and to avoid the public processions that are an integral part of Ashura in other countries with Shi'a populations. There also are unconfirmed reports that the Taliban has occupied and "cleansed" Shi'a

mosques for the use of Sunnis, including a Shi'a mosque in Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998.

The Taliban reportedly has required parents to give their children "Islamic" names.

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, including severe beatings. There were reports in 1998 that PVPV members in Kabul stopped persons on the street and demanded that they recite various Koranic prayers in order to determine the extent of their religious knowledge.

According to Taliban regulations, men's beards must protrude farther than would a fist clamped at the base of the chin. Men also must wear head coverings and may not have long hair. A man who has shaved or cut his beard may be imprisoned for 10 days and be required to undergo Islamic instruction. All students at Kabul University reportedly are required to have beards in order to study there (no female students are allowed).

At various times, the Taliban has banned certain traditional recreational activities, such as kite flying and playing chess, on religious grounds. Dolls, stuffed animals, and photographs are prohibited under the Taliban's interpretation of religious injunctions against representations of living beings; in search of these objects, Taliban soldiers or persons masquerading as Taliban members reportedly have entered private homes without prior notification or informed consent. Health care for both men and women 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 plagued with massive illiteracy. However, the Taliban allowed the visual depiction of persons in demining educational materials.

In public, women are required to don a head-to-toe garment known as the burqa, which has only a mesh screen for vision. Most women in rural areas traditionally wore burqas; however, many urban women did not wear burqas before the Taliban imposed this practice. 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. Women are not allowed to wear white burqas, white socks, or white shoes. Women reportedly are beaten if their shoe heels click 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 also must not be visible from the street; the Taliban requires that houses with female occupants have their windows painted over. However, during the period covered by this report, the Taliban reportedly eased some of the restrictions on women's dress.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In the recent past, the Taliban committed mass killings of the mainly Shi'a Hazaras in newly occupied territories, particularly in the north. Although the conflict between the Hazaras and the Taliban is political and military as well as religious, and it is not possible to state with certainty that the Taliban engaged in its campaign of persecution against the Shi'a solely because of their religious beliefs, the religious affiliation of the Hazaras reportedly is a significant factor leading to their repression by the Taliban.

Since it took control of Kabul in 1996, the Taliban reportedly has committed numerous human rights violations, particularly against the Hazaras. In January 2001, several NGO's reported that the Taliban massacred several hundred Shi'a civilians in Yakaolang in the center of the country. The massacre reportedly occurred after the Taliban recaptured the area from opposition forces. According to witnesses interviewed by HRW, after the Taliban recaptured the area, they rounded up victims from the surrounding villages, and shot or stabbed them with bayonets in the town center.

There were credible reports of the massacre of thousands of civilians and prisoners by the Taliban during and after the capture of Mazar-i-Sharif in August 1998; this massacre reportedly was aimed at ethnic Hazaras. In September 1998, approximately 500 persons were killed as the Taliban gained control of the city of Bamiyan. The Hazaras regained control of Bamiyan in April 1999 following prolonged guerilla-style warfare; however, the Taliban recaptured Bamiyan in May 1999 and reportedly killed a number of Shi'a residents.

There were reports during 1999 and 2000 that there were forced expulsions of ethnic Hazaras and Tajiks from areas controlled or conquered by the Taliban, as well as harassment of these minorities throughout Taliban-controlled areas.

In March 2001, the Taliban destroyed two giant pre-Islamic Buddha statues carved into cliffs in Bamiyan province, on the grounds that statues are idolatrous and insulting to Islam. The Taliban destroyed the 2,000-year-old statues despite appeals from the United Nations, international NGO's, and the world community, including many Muslim countries.

The Taliban ruled strictly in areas that it controlled, establishing ad hoc and rudimentary judicial systems. The Taliban established Islamic courts to judge criminal cases and to resolve disputes. The courts

reportedly dealt with all complaints, relying on the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law and punishments as well as tribal customs. In cases involving murder and rape, convicted prisoners generally were ordered to be executed, although relatives of the victim could instead choose to accept other restitution. Decisions of the courts reportedly were final. Taliban courts imposed their extreme interpretation of Islamic law and punishments following swift summary trials. Murderers were subjected to public executions, which sometimes took place before crowds of up to 30,000 persons at Kabul Stadium. Executions sometimes were carried out by throat slitting, a punishment that, at times, was inflicted by the victims' families. Thieves were subjected to public amputations of either one hand or one foot, or both. The U.N. Special Rapporteur for Torture noted particular concern about the use of amputation as a form of punishment by Taliban authorities. Adulterers were stoned to death or publicly whipped with 100 lashes. According to HRW in 1999, several men who were found guilty of homosexual acts were crushed by having walls toppled over them by a tank; one man who survived the ordeal after being left under the rubble for two hours reportedly was allowed to go free. There were no reports that homosexuals were punished in such a manner during the period covered by this report.

The Taliban seeks to impose its extreme interpretation of Islamic observance in areas that it controlled and has declared that all Muslims in areas under its control must abide by the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law. The Taliban announces its proclamations and edicts through broadcasts on the Taliban's "Radio Shariat," and relies on a religious police force under the control of the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice to enforce rules regarding appearance, dress, employment, access to medical care, behavior, religious practice, and freedom of expression. Members of the PVPV, which was raised to the status of a Ministry in May 1998, are supposed to regularly check persons on the street in order to ascertain that individuals are conforming to such Taliban edicts. Persons found to be in violation of the edicts are subject to punishment meted out on the spot, which may include beatings, detention, or both. In practice, the rigid policies adopted both by the Taliban and by certain opposition groups affects adversely adherents of other forms of Islam and of other faiths. Enforcement of Taliban social strictures is erratic; Taliban edicts generally are enforced in cities, especially in Kabul, and are enforced less consistently in rural areas, where more is left to local custom.

The Taliban's extreme interpretation and implementation of Shari'a (Islamic law) has had a particularly harmful effect on women. In Kabul and elsewhere, women found in public who are not wearing a burqa, or whose burqas do not cover their ankles properly, frequently are beaten by members of the religious police. 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. Some women who cannot afford to buy burqas have been unable to access necessary medical care. In a 1998 survey, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) found that 22 percent of the female respondents surveyed 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 reduced their public activities drastically during 1998 in Kabul.

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 who appear in public without a male relative risk being beaten by members of the religious police. Women are not allowed to drive, and taxi drivers reportedly are beaten if they take unescorted women as passengers. According to Amnesty International (AI), on October 19, 2000, a Taliban-controlled radio station reported that the Taliban confiscated 12 taxis for 3 days and warned drivers that they should "seriously avoid taking and transporting women without male relatives". Women may ride only on buses designated as women's buses; there are reportedly not enough of these buses to meet the demand, and the wait for women's buses can be lengthy. In 1998 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 years to collect fares from female passengers, and that neither the drivers nor the fare collectors were to mingle with the passengers.

When the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996, it immediately issued pronouncements forbidding women to work, including female doctors and nurses in hospitals. In a few cases, the Taliban has allowed women to work in health care occupations under restricted circumstances. Amnesty International reported that thousands of women around the country were laid off in April 2000. The prohibition on women working outside of the home has been especially difficult for the large numbers of widows left by over 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 also continued to interfere with the delivery of humanitarian assistance to women and girls. Male relatives also must obtain the permission of the PVPV for female home-based employment.

Restrictions on women's employment also affected women working in international NGO's. In June 2001, the religious police arrested four female employees of the World Food Program because they were not accompanied by a male family member. The women were released after spending 2 nights in jail. Also in June 2001, an

Italian-funded hospital in Kabul was forced to close temporarily to protect female staff from local religious police.

While most citizens 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. This policy contributed to a drastic reduction in access to and quality of health care for women. Several orders concerning the provision of emergency and nonemergency medical aid for women were given and reversed in 1997. In June 1998, the Taliban prohibited all doctors from treating female patients in the absence of a patient's husband, father, or brother. This decree, while not universally enforced, makes treatment extremely difficult for Kabul's widows, many of whom have lost all of their male family members. Furthermore, even when a woman is allowed to be treated by a male doctor, he may not see or touch her, which significantly limits the possibility of any meaningful treatment.

The Taliban's restrictions on medical treatment by male health professionals 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 do not allow male doctors to see children who are accompanied only by their mothers.

No information is available on the numbers of religious detainees or prisoners. There is no indication that religious detainees or prisoners are charged formally as part of their incarceration. However, the Taliban reportedly still holds many Hazara Shi'a prisoners, who were detained as a result of the country's civil war and not solely on the basis of their religion.

Very little information is available about territory held by the Northern Alliance, which controls much less territory than the Taliban and therefore affects a smaller percentage of the population. However, some groups within the Northern Alliance also are dedicated to enforcing strict adherence to Shari'a law. In past years, some members of the Northern Alliance were responsible for atrocities against Taliban forces during the war for control of the country.

The Ismaili community fought for the Northern Alliance against the Taliban and suffered when the Taliban occupied territories once held by Ismaili forces.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of any faction's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Relations between the different branches of Islam in the country are difficult. Historically, the minority Shi'a faced discrimination from the majority Sunni population. Most Shi'a Muslims are members of the Hazara ethnic group, which traditionally has been segregated from the rest of society. 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 acquired religious dimensions.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy in Kabul has been closed since 1989 for security reasons. The U.S. Government maintains contact with all factions but does not recognize any as the Government of Afghanistan. U.S. officials have raised religious freedom issues with representatives of the factions, including the Taliban, on several occasions and particularly have called for the protection of the rights of religious minorities. U.S. officials have made similar approaches to other governments regarding the behavior of the Taliban, including countries with influence in the country.

The Department of State has raised the issue of Taliban abuses committed against religious minorities in international forums and has voted in favor of U.N. Security Council and General Assembly resolutions criticizing abuses committed against Shi'a by the Taliban. In August 2000, the Department of State announced that it was doubling its refugee resettlement ceiling for the Near East and South Asian regions for the year 2000, in part to allow more Afghan women and their families into the United States. Following reports of the Taliban's destruction of the pre-Islamic statues in Bamiyan, the Department of State spokesman criticized strongly the action. In the preceding weeks, following reports of the Taliban's plan to destroy statues, the U.S. Government made efforts in conjunction with private institutions, other countries and international organizations to deter the destruction. Following reports of the Taliban's edict requiring Hindus to wear identifying badges, the Department of State spokesman criticized the proposed edict and reaffirmed the Department's concerns about similar abuses.

In September 2000, the former Secretary of State identified the Taliban as a particularly severe violator of religious freedom.

* Information on the religious freedom situation in Afghanistan is limited because there is no U.S. Government presence in the country.

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