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Immigration and
Refugee Board of Canada

Commission de l'immigration
et du statut de réfugié du Canada

Afghanistan: Situation of Afghan citizens who work for NGOs or international aid organizations, and whether they are targeted by the Taliban; attacks against schools and incidents of violence against students, teachers, and the educational sector; state response (2012-January 2016) [AFG105413.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Security Situation of Civilians

Sources report that amid the withdrawal of the international military presence from Afghanistan during 2014, civilians have been increasingly targeted for violence (Freedom House 28 Jan. 2015; AI 12 Dec. 2014) by the Taliban and other armed groups [1] (ibid.). According to the 2014 annual report of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), a "national quasi-governmental body with a mandate to promote and protect the human rights of Afghans and to investigate alleged human rights violations" (Canada 9 Feb. 2015), there was a 20 percent increase in violent incidents resulting in the killing and injury of civilians from 2013, with 5,429 total incidents and 1,970 civilians killed by "anti-government armed elements" (AIHRC 11 Aug. 2015, 3). The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) documented 4,921 civilian casualties in the first half of 2015, marking the highest number of total civilian casualties ever recorded during that reporting period (UN Aug. 2015, 1). The same source states that an increase in suicide attacks and targeted killings by anti-government armed groups, the majority of which are attributed to the Taliban, are the reason for high civilian casualty rates (ibid., 2).

2. Afghans Locally Employed by NGOs or Aid Organizations

According to Freedom House, there are 287 international organizations, 1,911 Afghan NGOs, and over 4,000 other associations operating in Afghanistan (28 Jan. 2015). A 2014 report by the Afghanistan Public Policy Research Organization (APPRO), an Afghan "independent social research organization with a mandate to promote social and policy learning for development aid provision" (APPRO n.d.), cites media and NGO monitoring as stating that the exact number of NGOs operating is unclear, but that there are around "1,500 or 2,200" NGOs registered with the government in Afghanistan, and approximately 72,000 Afghans working for

these organizations (ibid. Jan. 2014, 10). According to the *New York Times*, the aid community employs about 90,000 people in Afghanistan, the "vast majority" of whom are locally employed Afghans (2 Dec. 2013).

3. Attacks Against NGOs

Sources from 2015 state that the security situation in Afghanistan impedes the work of civil society and humanitarian organizations (US 25 June 2015, 19; Freedom House 28 Jan. 2015). Sources published within the past two years further report that there has been an increase in attacks on aid agencies in districts where the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) have transferred security operations to Afghan forces (UN 9 Sept. 2014; AIHRC 18 Jan. 2016). The 2014 APPRO report indicates that since 2006, Afghanistan has become increasingly dangerous for NGOs to operate, with increased NGO worker casualties, either from targeting or as "collateral victims" (APPRO Jan. 2014, 6). The International NGO Safety Organization, a British charity that "supports the safety of aid workers by establishing safety coordination platforms in insecure contexts (INSO n.d.), states that incidents where NGOs were directly targeted were "rare" in 2015 (INSO Jan. 2016). However, the same source indicates that there were prominent cases in 2015 where Afghan NGOs were targeted by armed groups due to a belief that their work violated cultural or religious customs or that the organizations were perceived to be "non-neutral" entities (ibid.).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an analyst with the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), an independent non-profit policy and research organization based in Afghanistan, explained that the Taliban targeting of NGOs and schools that has occurred in recent years is "very dependent on local political conditions" in which the organizations or schools are operating (AAN 20 Jan. 2016). IRIN, the former humanitarian news agency of the UN, observes that humanitarian organizations operate in a "shifting scene of local warlords, commanders and tribal alliances" (UN 9 Sept. 2014). According to APPRO, some humanitarian organizations negotiate and gain permission to operate from armed opposition groups (Jan. 2014, 6). The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2014* further notes that NGOs have been required to pay bribes to powerful individuals and militia leaders in order to provide humanitarian aid to some areas (25 June 2015, 20).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a representative of the AIHRC indicated that Ghazni, Zabul, Kunduz, Laghman, and Nangarhar have seen relatively higher levels of incidents involving NGO workers than other parts of the country (18 Jan. 2016).

4. Targeting of NGO and Aid Workers

Human Rights Watch states that the Taliban have developed codes of conduct called *layha*, which reportedly "include rules on sparing civilians" from harm, but exclude government employees and humanitarian workers (Human Rights Watch 18 May 2015). The same source indicates that in May 2015, the Taliban issued a statement following a hotel attack in which 12 civilians were killed stating that "[e]very foreigner from invading country [sic] especially NATO is considered an invader" and that Afghans who work with foreigners, including aid workers, are considered to be "hirelings" (ibid.).

According to the AAN analyst, the Taliban continues to target local aid workers and local staff of international organizations, though the organization's reputation with the community and local political climate impacts whether workers will encounter problems (AAN 20 Jan. 2016). The same source said that NGO employees are the targets of intimidation by the Taliban (ibid.). Similarly, Freedom House states that in 2015, civil society and human rights activists continued to "face threats and harassment" (28 Jan. 2015). *Country Reports 2014* indicates that insurgents "deliberately targeted" aid workers for attack, threats and robbery (US 25 June 2015, 2, 19). According to the humanitarian coordinator for the UN in Afghanistan, interviewed by the *Guardian*, humanitarian workers are "more vulnerable" because "[t]hey work on the frontline" and because "they are more noticeable in terms of what they do in the community" (*The Guardian*, 4 June 2015). Sources report that aid workers face the risk of being labelled as "spies" by insurgents (UN 9 Sept. 2014; ODI Dec. 2012, iii), or as "foreign agents" (*The Guardian* 4 June 2015).

According to UN figures quoted by the *New York Times*, in 2012, there were 175 attacks on aid workers, resulting in 11 deaths, 26 wounded and 44 detained or abducted (*The New York Times* 2 Dec. 2013). The same source reports that from January to November 2013, there were 237 attacks on aid workers, with 36 killed, 46 wounded, and 96 detained or abducted (ibid.).

Amnesty International (AI) quotes the International NGO Safety Organization in Afghanistan as stating that in 2014, there were 153 attacks on aid workers perpetrated mainly by the Taliban, which resulted in the deaths of 34 people and injuries of 33 people (AI 28 Feb. 2015). *The Guardian* further cites UN data as indicating that 57 aid workers were killed in Afghanistan in 2014 (*The Guardian* 4 June 2015).

A UN Security Council report on the situation in Afghanistan indicates that in the first 7 months of 2015, there were 140 recorded security incidents involving humanitarian related personnel, assets, facilities, or violations against healthcare facilities (UN 1 Sept. 2015, para. 45).

4.1 Abductions

Sources report that humanitarian workers in Afghanistan have been targeted for kidnapping and abduction (UN Aug. 2015, 61; AIHRC 18 Jan. 2016) for ransom (ibid.). AIHRC reports that NGO and aid workers may also be kidnapped for use by insurgents to bargain for prisoner exchanges (AIHRC 18 Jan. 2016) or in order to put pressure on the government (AAN 20 Jan. 2016). According to the AAN analyst, it is possible that "for ideological reasons," people who have worked for "visibly American" organizations may face a greater risk of being targeted (AAN 20 Jan. 2016).

UNAMA indicates that during the first 6 months of 2015, anti-government groups carried out 15 abduction incidents, kidnapping 44 humanitarian aid workers and NGO staff, of which 6 were killed, 1 remains captive, and the others were released (UN Aug. 2015, 61). A UN report produced in September 2015 states that 90 aid workers had been abducted in the first 7 months of 2015 (UN 1 Sept. 2015, para. 45).

4.2 Killings and Attacks

According to sources, Afghan NGO workers have been the object of targeted killings by anti-government groups (UN Aug. 2015, 52; *The Guardian* 4 June 2015). The UN reports that in the first seven months of 2015, 28 aid workers were wounded in security related incidents (1 Sept. 2015, para. 45). Sources report on examples of killings and attacks on NGO workers:

- On 29 May 2013, a group of four suicide bombers attacked the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] office in Jalalabad, killing one person (US 27 Feb. 2014, 19);
- In August 2013 in Herat, the Taliban kidnapped and killed five Afghan employees of the International Rescue Committee (ibid., 18);
- In July and in December 2014, 17 mine-removal workers were killed by gunmen in 2 separate incidents in Herat and Helmand (ibid. 25 June 2015, 20)
- In May 2015, seven humanitarian workers were killed in Kabul (UN 1 Sept. 2015, para. 45; AI 2 June 2015) when the Taliban attacked a hotel where they were housed (ibid.). The UN reports that five of the seven victims were Afghan nationals (UN 1 Sept. 2015, para. 45);
- In the spring of 2015, the Taliban abducted and killed five Afghan staff members of Save the Children, an international NGO (UN Aug. 2015, 61; *The Guardian* 4 June 2015). Victims were held for 40 days and abductors demanded a prisoner exchange and cash ransom of 400,000 pounds, which the victims' families could not afford (ibid.);
- In June 2015, the compound of People in Need, an international NGO, was allegedly entered by an armed group and nine Afghan civilian employees were killed (AAN 20 Jan. 2016; UN Aug. 2015, 52), including a pregnant woman (ibid.). The Country Director for the organization, whose headquarters is located in Balh, stated that the workers were murdered "execution style" (*The Guardian* 4 June 2015);
- A local employee of UNAMA was assassinated by unknown gunmen in Kandahar in October 2015 (Xinhua News Agency 12 Oct. 2015; MENAFN 12 Oct. 2015)
- In October 2015, a vehicle carrying eight staff of AIHRC was attacked, wounding six and killing two people (AI 26 Oct. 2015)

Sources report that in the fall of 2015, the Taliban launched an assault on the city of Kunduz (AAN 20 Jan. 2016; AI 1 Oct. 2015). According to the AAN analyst, after the city fell in September, the Taliban reportedly started looking for people they identified as NGO workers based on personnel information they "presumably" obtained while breaking into NGO offices (AAN 20 Jan. 2016). AI states that the Taliban had a list containing photos and names which they allegedly used to locate activists, journalists and civil servants during house-to-house searches (AI 1 Oct. 2015). According to AI, during the assault, the Taliban looted NGO property, including the ICRC, burned offices, and destroyed equipment belonging to civil society groups (ibid. 29 Sept. 2015).

5. Targeting by Criminal Groups

Sources report that NGO workers may also be targeted by criminal groups (*The New York Times* 2 Dec. 2013), including for kidnapping and for ransom (ANSO Apr. 2013, 6). The AAN analyst explained that an NGO employee may be perceived to be better paid, or as a "prized individual" because they have equipment or assets, and therefore may be targeted for robbery (AAN 20 Jan. 2016). Similarly, the *Guardian* quotes the UN's Humanitarian Coordinator in Afghanistan as stating that those working for international organizations are perceived as easy criminal targets (4 June 2015). *The New York Times* quotes the Director of ACBAR, an organization that represents many leading Afghan NGOs, as reporting that the group counted 32 fatalities related to criminality in 2013 (*The New York Times* 2 Dec. 2013).

6. Attacks Against Schools and School Closures

According to a report on the security situation of schools in Afghanistan produced by the AAN in 2013, attacks on school buildings are "banned" by the Taliban, but individual Taliban networks "may pursue their own aims toward states schools, including ordering violent attacks" (AAN Feb. 2013, 2). Sources report that the Taliban continues to attack schools (ibid. 20 Jan. 2016; US 25 June 2014, 20; Reuters 21 Apr. 2013; Human Rights Watch 2 Apr. 2014). According to Human Rights Watch, more than 1,000 school-related attacks have occurred in Afghanistan over the last 5 years (ibid.). According to a 2014 report by the UN on children and armed conflict, parties to the Afghanistan conflict attacked schools in at least 73 incidents during 2013 (UN 15 May 2014, para. 27). The same source notes that some of these attacks involved the planting of explosive devices in the buildings (ibid.). According to figures quoted from a Ministry of Education official cited in Afghan magazine *Killid Weekly*, 100 schools were partly destroyed in attacks by the Taliban and anti-government forces in 2014 (*Killid Weekly* 28 Dec. 2015). The Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), an international think tank "dedicated to developing metrics to analyse peace and to quantify its economic value" (IEP n.d.), also notes that, in 2014, 21 people were killed and 198 injured in attacks on educational institutions (IEP 2015, 21). The same source states that in 2015, 13 people were killed and 34 injured in attacks on educational institutions (ibid.). Sources report on the following examples of attacks on educational institutions by armed groups:

- In December 2014, a suicide bomber attacked a high school in Kabul during a school performance, killing one person and injuring at least a dozen civilians (AI 12 Dec. 2014; Tolo News 12 Dec. 2014). The high school was located next to the presidential palace (ibid.);
- In December 2014, a bomb exploded in a school in Nangarhar province, injuring nine students (Pajhwok 14 Dec. 2014);
- In January 2016, unknown assailants torched a girls' school in Kabul killing a security guard; the incident was reportedly the first time an attack had occurred on a school in Kabul (Tolo News 18 January 2016).

Sources report on instances where the Taliban has forced the closure of schools (UN 15 May 2014, para. 27; *Killid Weekly* 28 Dec. 2015). The AAN analyst also noted that in regions where the Taliban is prominent, the group has pre-emptively closed schools prior to large operations occurring in the area to prevent civilian casualties (AAN 20 Jan. 2016).

6.1 Targeted Attacks Against Students and Teachers

According to a 2013 report on the security situation of schools in Afghanistan published by the AAN, if schools do not comply with Taliban rules, closures or attacks on staff may be ordered (AAN Feb. 2013, 2). The same source indicates that targeted attacks on Ministry of Education staff or students who refuse to comply with the group's orders is the "official policy of the Taliban" (ibid., 2).

Sources report that there have been instances of poisoning attacks against school students (Reuters 21 Apr. 2013; Pajhwok 18 Apr. 2013) with one instance in 2012 leaving 700 female students poisoned by contaminated water by unknown assailants (ibid.). According to IEP, in 2013, the Taliban launched at least 7 attacks targeting female students attending school, resulting in more than 160 casualties (IEP 2015, 21). The UN further states that at least 13 teachers were killed or injured in 2013 and 8 teachers were abducted by armed opponents in 2013 (UN 15 May 2014, para. 27). Sources report on the following examples:

- In September 2014 in Farah province, a school headmaster was kidnapped and killed by the Taliban; the two other occupants of the vehicle were not harmed (Pajhwok 4 Sept. 2014);
- In May 2015, in southern Helmand, unknown assailants opened fire and killed a local teacher as he left his house (Pajhwok 30 May 2015);
- In June 2015, in central Logar province, a teacher was shot dead on his way to school, marking the 18th killing of a teacher in the province in 2015 (ibid. 11 June 2015).

7. State Response

Sources indicate that the police do not have the resources or capacity to handle threats or security problems encountered by NGO employees as a result of their work (AIHRC 18 Jan. 2016; AAN 20 Jan. 2016). The AAN analyst stated that during the assault on Kunduz in the fall of 2015, NGO workers were left to protect themselves and were not effectively protected from the Taliban by the authorities (ibid.). The AIHRC representative said that employees affected by security problems take their own measures to protect themselves (18 Jan. 2016). The AAN analyst explained that people prefer to not approach the police because they do not know if the police are connected to insurgents; they instead approach their employer about their security problems and the employer is sometimes able to take their own measures or relocate the individual (AAN 20 Jan. 2016). Furthermore, the analyst explained that approaching the police could make the situation worse for staff because it may raise perceptions that the NGO is connected with the government (ibid.).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Note

[1] The UN lists a number of armed groups fighting in Afghanistan who are referred to as "Anti-Government Elements"; this list includes, among others, those identifying as the "Taliban" and other armed groups such as: Haqqani network, Hezbe-e-Islami, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Lashkari Tayyiba, Jaysh Muhammed, and Daesh [IS, ISIS, ISIL] (UN Aug. 2015, 2)

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