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Afghanistan

International Religious Freedom Report 2004

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Afghanistan experienced civil war and political instability for 24 years. There was no functioning central government until December 22, 2001, when the Afghan Interim Administration (AIA) took office. In June 2002, the Emergency Loya Jirga, a gathering of Afghan representatives from throughout the country, declared that the official name of the country was the "Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan (TISA)" and elected Hamid Karzai as President. Karzai subsequently formed a Cabinet including female members and broad ethnic representation. On January 4, representatives at the Constitutional Loya Jirga (CLJ) adopted a new Constitution that provides for equal rights for women and minorities and reaffirms commitment to international human rights conventions.

During most of 2001, the Taliban, an ultra-conservative Islamic movement, controlled approximately 90 percent of the country. Under the Taliban, freedom of religion was restricted severely. On October 7, 2001, a U.S.-led coalition began military operations aimed at toppling the Taliban regime and eliminating the al-Qaida terrorist network in Afghanistan, and by mid-November the Taliban had been removed from power. In December 2001, a U.N.-sponsored Afghan peace conference in Bonn, Germany, approved a broad agreement for the establishment of a transitional government to rule during an interim period while preparations for a new constitution and national elections were instituted. The Bonn Agreement mandated the creation of a Constitutional Commission, Human Rights Commission, Judicial Commission, and a Civil Service Commission to oversee reforms in these areas.

From December 2001 to January 4, the legal basis for religious freedom in Afghanistan was found in the December 2001 Bonn Agreement and in the 1964 Constitution.

The Bonn Agreement designated the Constitutional Commission with responsibility for drafting a new constitution. A nine-member Drafting Committee of the Constitutional Commission was formed in October 2002 and completed a first draft of the new Constitution in March 2003. President Karzai named a full Constitutional Commission with 35 members in April 2003. Commission membership included seven women, four Shi'a, an Ismaili, a Hindu, and broad ethnic representation. The full Commission completed its review of the draft Constitution in June 2003 and launched a public consultation process shortly thereafter. In November 2003, TISA released the draft Constitution, which was vigorously debated at the CLJ in December 2003 and ratified on January 4. The new Constitution renames the country as the "Islamic Republic of Afghanistan" and proclaims that the "religion of the state of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is the sacred religion of Islam." It also states that, "followers of other religions are free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of law."

TISA regulations and the new Constitution provide for freedom of religion, and TISA generally respected this right in practice.

Relations between the different branches of Islam in the country have been difficult. Historically, the minority Shi'a faced discrimination from the majority Sunni population. Some conservative elements advocated that a new constitution should favor the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence associated with the Sunnis over the Jafari school used by the Shi'as. In family disputes, courts relied on a civil code that is based on the Sunni Hanafi school, regardless of whether the parties involved were Shi'a or Sunni; the civil code also applies to non-Muslims. The Shari'a Faculty of Kabul University followed the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. Conservative elements also called for the primacy of Shari'a law in the country's legal system. However, the new Constitution does not grant preferential status to the Hanafi school, nor does

it make specific reference to Shari'a law. The Constitution also grants that Shi'a law will be applied to cases dealing with personal matters involving Shi'as; there is no separate law applying to non-Muslims. At the end of the period covered by this report, the country had ratified seven international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (March 2003).

Prior to the fall of the Taliban, the U.S. Government did not maintain an official presence in the country. The Secretary of State designated the Taliban as a particularly severe violator of religious freedom with Country of Particular Concern status in 1999, 2000, and 2001. Since December 2001, when the U.S. Embassy in Kabul re-opened, the U.S. government has discussed religious freedom issues with Government officials as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 251,738 square miles and its population is approximately 25.8 million. Reliable data on the country's religious demography is not available; a census has not been taken in decades. However, observers estimate that 84 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim; approximately 15 percent is Shi'a Muslim; and other religions, including Sikhs, Hindus, and Jews, make up less than 1 percent of the population. There also is a small, low-profile Christian community, in addition to small numbers of adherents of other religions; any proselytizing is discreet.

Traditionally, Sunni Islam of the Hanafi school of jurisprudence has been the dominant religion. For the last 200 years, Sunnis often have looked to the example of the Darul Uloom madrassah (religious school) located in Deoband near Delhi, India. The Deobandi school has long sought to purify Islam by discarding supposedly un-Islamic accretions to the faith and reemphasizing the models that it believes were established in the 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 Islam, generally known as Sufism. Sufism, which could be characterized as a branch of Sunni Islam, centers on orders or brotherhoods that follow charismatic religious leaders.

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

In the past, small communities of Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, and Christians lived in the country; however, most members of these communities have left. Even at their peak, these non-Muslim minorities constituted less than 1 percent of the population. Most of the country's small Hindu and Sikh population, which once numbered about 50,000 persons, emigrated or took refuge abroad during the many years of conflict. However, after the fall of the Taliban, some minorities have begun to return. Non-Muslims such as Hindus, Sikhs, and Jews were estimated to number only in the hundreds at the end of Taliban rule. According to a Sikh community leader in Kabul, an estimated 3,000 Sikh and Hindu families were living in the country at the end of 2003; however, this figure could not be verified.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Until January the country relied upon the Bonn Agreement and the 1964 Constitution. Since January 4, the new Constitution has been in effect; however, in practice, its provisions will only be fully enforceable once the long-term process of overhauling and reforming the government and judicial sector is completed. The June 2002 Loya Jirga declared that the official name of the government was the "Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan." The new Constitution declares the country to be an "Islamic

Republic." As with the 1964 Constitution, the new Constitution proclaims that Islam is the "religion of the state"; however, it does not prohibit the practice of other religions. The new Constitution also declares "no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam." It also states that, "followers of other religions are free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of law."

The licensing and registration of religious groups is not required in any part of the country by the authorities. Proselytizing is viewed as contrary to the beliefs of Islam; however, there were no laws forbidding proselytizing. There was an unconfirmed report that the Taliban killed a former Muslim cleric on June 30, allegedly for preaching Christianity. Article 1 of the current, unreformed, penal code states that the code addresses only Tazir (less serious) crimes, and that the more serious categories of Qisas and Hudud crimes fall under Shari'a law. Blasphemy and apostasy (converting from Islam to another religion) fall under the latter category, and are—in theory—punishable by death.

The new Constitution makes no reference to Shari'a law, and Article 7 commits the state to abide by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and other international treaties and conventions to which the country is a party. Although the rights of conversion and proselytism are not spelled out explicitly in the Constitution, both the UDHR and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which the country also has ratified, require protection of these rights. Provisions, particularly Article 31, of the 1964 Constitution protected freedom of speech. Article 34 of the new Constitution protects freedom of expression and of the press. The Afghan Press Law adopted in April 2002 contained an injunction against information that "could mean insult to the sacred religion of Islam and other religions." The ambiguity surrounding what constitutes offensive material offered the potential for abuse of this clause in order to restrict press freedom and intimidate journalists. The Afghan Press Law did not require information to follow Shari'a law. However, the section on criminal rules stated that if no punishment is prescribed in existing legal codes for crimes mentioned in the press law, then the punishment will be in accordance with Shari'a (Hanafi school). These rules also apply to non-Muslims. The law was reviewed by the Ministry of Information and Culture, and President Karzai signed the amended Afghan Law on Mass Media into law in late March. The Law on Mass Media retains the broad and vague content restriction on "subjects that are contrary to principles of Islam and offensive to other religions and sects," but it excludes any reference to Shari'a.

Only Islamic holidays are celebrated as public holidays. The TISA has proclaimed the first day of Ramadan, Eid-ul Fitr, Eid-ul Adha, the Prophet Mohammad's birthday, and the 10th of Muharram (Ashura—both Sunni and Shi'a) as national holidays. All mark events on the Islamic calendar, and there were no reports that these holidays negatively affected other religious groups. The Shi'a community in the country is able to celebrate openly the birthday of Imam Ali, one of the most revered figures in the Shi'a tradition, as well as commemorate the 10th of Muharram (Ashura), which marks the murder of the Prophet Mohammad's grandson, Hussein. Under the Taliban, Shi'a could not celebrate their holy days openly, although they were able to do so in prior years. There were no reported incidents surrounding Shi'a religious celebrations during the year-and-a-half following the Taliban's fall, but there was an incident during the reporting period (See Section III).

The parts of the country's educational system that survived more than 20 years of war placed considerable emphasis on religion. During the reporting period, the public school curriculum included religious subjects, but non-Muslims were not required to study Islam. Detailed religious study was conducted under the guidance of religious leaders. There was no restriction on parental religious teaching. The Ministry of Education began introducing human rights as a subject in the national school curriculum at the beginning of the school year in March 2003 and extended it nationwide in March. A curriculum and textbooks that emphasizes general Islamic terms and principles steadily replaced the preaching of jihad in schools. By the end of the period covered by this report, all Kabul schools and the surrounding provinces were using the new (non-jihad) texts, which covered approximately 15 provinces or just under half of all provinces.

The Human Rights Commission conducted national consultations on transitional justice, promoted reconciliation at civil society gatherings, and through various media, and continued to receive reports of abuses from citizens. In April 2003, the Ministry of Interior established a Human Rights Department to investigate human rights abuses, and this department set up local branches in the offices of Chiefs of Police in all but three provinces by the end of the reporting period.

During the reporting period, the Government provided guards for the five or six unused Sikh gurdwaras in Kabul, as well as a shuttle for worshippers. President Karzai visited the Sikh school in the summer of 2002 (co-located with the only functioning gurdwara), after which the Ministry of Education assigned four part-time Dari language teachers to the school. Shi'a schools are permitted unrestricted operation; there are no Christian or Jewish schools.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Conversion from Islam is considered apostasy and is punishable by death under Shari'a. During the reporting period, there were unconfirmed allegations that converts to Christianity faced societal discrimination and threats. There was no information available concerning restrictions on the general training of clergy. Immigrants and noncitizens were free to practice their own religions. In Kabul 200 to 300 expatriates meet regularly at Christian worship services. Since the fall of the Taliban, no political parties (other than the Taliban) have been banned or discouraged. However, after TISA passed the Political Parties Registration Law in October 2003, the Supreme Court banned communists from forming a political party because they are atheists. Christian-based international relief organizations generally operated without interference, but antigovernment militants sometimes harassed foreign missionaries and other religiously oriented organizations. For example, after an attack in late September 2003 that killed two employees of the Voluntary Association for Rehabilitation of Afghanistan, a Taliban spokesman accused the organization and other NGOs of preaching Christianity; there were no further details on the attack during the reporting period.

In November 2001, the former Department of Vice and Virtue was dissolved and replaced by the Department of Accountability and Religious Affairs. According to the Minister of Hajj and Mosques, no former members of the Department of Vice and Virtue were employed by the Ministry. Shi'as are permitted to go on the Hajj, and there is no quota system for those making the pilgrimage. Most women in rural areas wear burqas, a traditional full body and face covering; however, many urban women did not wear burqas before the Taliban imposed this practice. While a number of women in urban areas no longer wear the burqa since the fall of the Taliban, a majority of women continue to do so either from choice or community pressure. In central Kabul, construction of the first mosque in the country to make provision for women worshippers continued.

There were a few reports that government forces at local levels prohibited music, movies, and television on religious grounds. For example, in April officials in Nangarhar Province briefly banned the appearance of women singers on television; however, the officials' superiors reversed their prohibition. On January 14, Kabul Television broadcast a female singer for the first time in more than a decade, prompting protests from conservatives in the Supreme Court who briefly forced the station to stop airing such performances. Moderates in the Government lifted that ban in late January, saying women singers on television were permitted under the new Constitution. Previously, in January 2003, the Supreme Court banned cable television nationwide on religious grounds, but the ban was lifted in April 2003 when the Government passed a law allowing the resumption of cable services. The central Government has not banned any form of media, and the cable television audience in urban centers continued to expand. Unlike previous years, televisions, radios, and other electronic goods were sold freely, and music was played widely. For example, Kabul continued to have five radio stations, including the official Radio Kabul. The nongovernmental stations broadcast a mix of Afghan, Indian, Pakistani, and Western music. The stations had no religious content other than brief prayers and Koran readings on the government-controlled radio station.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The new Constitution requires that the President and vice-President of Afghanistan be Muslims, and does not distinguish in this respect between Sunnis and Shi'as. This is not explicitly stated in the case of government ministers, but the oath required of ministers does suggest adherence to the Muslim faith. There is no religious requirement for Members of Parliament in the new Constitution.

Sporadic violations of religious freedom by some officials occurred. In June 2003, two editors of a weekly Kabul publication were arrested for allegedly violating Article 30 of the Afghan Press Law that prohibits publications of articles defaming Islam. Conservatives within the Judiciary recommended the journalists be charged with "insulting Islam" or blasphemy; however, senior

Government officials ultimately supported action short of criminal prosecution. Police searched the editors' offices, and the national intelligence agency confiscated the editors' publication, "Aftaab," from stores. Moderates led by the Minister of Information and Culture argued for the release of the journalists and a resolution to the Afghan Press Law—since amended—that permits administrative punishment (a fine) in lieu of prosecution. Within a week, President Karzai ordered the editors released on bail; however, the charges of blasphemy were not dropped. Subsequently, the two journalists obtained asylum outside the country during the second half of 2003.

In January 2003, the Governor of Helmand confiscated approximately 200 Hazara-owned shops in Lashkar Gah and distributed them to other town residents. The Governor also blocked the Hazara/Shi'a community from building a mosque in Lashkar Gah. While the Human Rights Commission and the UN had reached an agreement in February 2003 with the Governor to compensate Hazara shopkeepers with land elsewhere in Lashkar Gah, the Governor had only partly honored this agreement by the end of the period covered by this report.

In early October 2003, a grenade was lobbed at the only functioning Sikh gurdwara (or temple) in Kabul. There were no casualties. Prior to the incident, local police had warned the gurdwara authorities of a possible attack. Although police and intelligence officials investigated the attack, no suspects had been apprehended by the end of the reporting period.

In an October 2002 incident in Kabul, 28 Tablighi Jamaatis, itinerant lay Muslim missionary preachers of the Sunni branch of Islam, were detained by police for a week. In November 2003, 12 Tablighi preachers were detained for a day in Kandahar. There was no further police action against Tablighi preachers during the period covered by the report. The Tablighi claimed their mission was to spread the word of Islam. Some government intelligence officials accused the Tablighi of subversive work for Pakistan. During the period covered by the report, no action was taken against the police who detained the Tablighi preachers.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

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 the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The fall of the Taliban and the subsequent establishment of the AIA and the TISA resulted in a major improvement in religious freedom. The Bonn Agreement and the 1964 Constitution replaced Taliban policies and laws. Sikh and Hindu representatives at the June 2002 Emergency Loya Jirga reported that they no longer were repressed and felt free to practice their religions. The Government encouraged Sikhs, Hindus, and other minorities to return, and there was a small but steady flow of returnees during the year. The new Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, assembly, and religion within the limits of the law, as well as equal rights for women and minorities.

The Government has stressed reconciliation and cooperation among all citizens. Although the Government primarily is concerned with ethnic reconciliation, it also has expressed concern about religious tolerance. The TISA responded positively to all international approaches on human rights, including religious freedom. The Government emphasized ethnic and intra-faith reconciliation indirectly through the creation and empowerment of the Judicial, Constitutional, and Human Rights Commissions, comprised of members of different ethnic and Muslim religious (Sunni and Shi'a) groups. The Constitutional Commission also included a Hindu member to represent non-Muslim religious minorities. Sikh and Hindu leaders were consulted regularly during the preparation of the draft Constitution and elected three delegates, including a

woman, to the CLJ.

During the period covered by this report, the TISA included Hazara and other Shi'a figures, including Vice-President Khalili, Minister for Women's Affairs Habiba Sorabi, Human Rights Commission Chair Dr. Sima Samar, Minister of Planning Ramazan Bashardost (until March 7 the Minister of Planning was Mohammad Mohaqqueq, who is also a Hazara Shi'a), Minister of Commerce Mustafa Kazemi, Minister of Agriculture Hussein Anwari, and Minister of Transportation Mohammad Jawed.

During the period covered by this report, the Human Rights Commission continued to conduct national consultations on transitional justice, promoted reconciliation at civil society gatherings and through various media, and continued to receive reports of abuses from citizens. In April 2003, the Ministry of Interior established a Human Rights Department to investigate human rights abuses, and this department set up local branches in the offices of Chiefs of Police in all but three provinces by the end of the reporting period.

The Human Rights Commission also advocated for the rights of Sikhs and Hindus, when this community complained in late 2003 that it was being denied access to its traditional cremation ground in Kabul by local residents. The Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs was also sympathetic and responded to this complaint. In March Kabul municipal authorities allocated an alternative cremation site to the Sikh-Hindu community; however, by the end of the reporting period, this community had not yet assumed control of the allocated site.

During the reporting period, the Government provided guards for the five or six unused Sikh gurdwaras in Kabul, as well as a shuttle for worshippers. In the summer of 2002, President Karzai visited the Sikh school (co-located with the only functioning gurdwara), after which the Ministry of Education assigned four part-time Dari language teachers to the school.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Relations between the different branches of Islam in the country have been 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 for a combination of political, ethnic, and religious reasons. Throughout the country's history, there have been many examples of conflicts between the Hazaras and other citizens. These conflicts often have had economic and political roots but also have acquired religious dimensions. The treatment of Shi'a varied from locality to locality. However, the active persecution of the country's Shi'a minority, including Ismailis, under the Taliban regime has ended, and, although some discrimination continues at the local level, Shi'a generally are free to participate fully in public life.

Before the October 2001 collapse of the Taliban, 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 was political and military as well as religious, the religious affiliation of the Hazaras was a significant factor leading to their repression. In practice the rigid policies adopted both by the Taliban and by certain opposition groups affected adversely adherents of other branches of Islam and other religions.

On March 1, a riot that began when 2 individuals were seen mocking a Shi'a procession in Kabul to commemorate the Battle of Karbala led to 2 deaths and over 30 injuries. This was the only reported incident surrounding Shi'a religious celebrations during the reporting period.

Non-Muslim minorities such as Sikhs and Hindus continue to face social discrimination and harassment, but this circumstance is not systematic and the Government is trying to address their concerns.

In June 2003, 12 Pashtun Sunnis were killed during an attack on their bus in northeastern Helmand province. Robbery was reportedly the motive, but there were claims that the assailants were Hazara Shi'as. The Human Rights Commission investigated the case and concluded during the summer of 2003 that the attack was related to the narcotics trade and that religious sectarianism was not the motive.

On January 6, unidentified gunmen killed 12 Hazaras while they were traveling in southern Helmand Province. According to the Human Rights Commission, the motive for the attack was a family feud.

After the fall of the Taliban, there continued to be episodic reports of individuals at the local level using coercion to enforce social and religious conformity. During the reporting period, President Karzai and other moderates in the central government opposed attempts by conservative elements to enforce rules regarding social and religious practices based on their interpretation of Islamic law. The Taliban's religious police force, the Department of Vice and Virtue, was replaced by the Department of Accountability and Religious Affairs, with a stated goal of promoting "Islamic values"; however, the department lacks any enforcement or regulatory authority.

In Herat there were continued reports of forced chastity examinations by religious police for women found with males who were not their relatives; however, reports declined during the latter months of the reporting period. It was difficult to know whether this was a systematic practice or took place on a sporadic basis, sometimes at the request of family members and in the context of an extremely socially conservative environment. There were no reports of examinations directed at non-Muslims. Local officials also have confronted women over their attire and behavior, although there were no known official policies mandating the wearing of the burqa or regulating the activities of women.

Attacks by remnants of the al-Qaida and Taliban networks continued during the reporting period. Several killings of religious leaders and attacks on mosques were attributed to al-Qaida and Taliban members who objected to their victims' links with the Karzai administration and to their public interpretations of Islam.

In December 2002, the 15-member Kandahar Ulema-u-Shura issued a religious edict denouncing the Taliban's call for jihad. Subsequently, the Taliban denounced the Ulema-u-Shura and left pamphlets in mosques and bazaars threatening religious leaders and government supporters.

On April 28, Maulana Abdul Bari, a former Minister of Hajj and Religious Affairs in Kandahar, was shot and killed outside his home by suspected Taliban members. At the end of the reporting period, the Government indicated that there had been no arrests in the case, which continues under investigation.

On June 30, 2003, a mosque in Kandahar was bombed during the final prayer of the day, and 16 worshippers were wounded. The leader of the mosque and head of Kandahar's Ulema-u-Shura (clerics' council), Mullah Abdullah Fayaz, had stated that the Taliban were not following Islam and that their interpretation of Islam was wrong. The Ministry of the Interior stated that two individuals were arrested, one in July 2003 and the other in August 2003. Subsequently, one was released by court order and the other escaped from jail in October 2003.

In May 2003, Habibullah, a Muslim cleric with close ties to President Karzai, was shot and killed outside a mosque in Deh Rawood district. Six persons were detained in connection with the killing. President Karzai issued a statement condemning the murder. By the end of the reporting period, there were no arrests or convictions and no further information on the persons originally detained.

On May 7, 2003, a well-known religious scholar, Mowlawi Haji Abdollah, was shot and killed after leaving a mosque after prayers in central Uruzgan Province. The Government said that remnants of the Taliban and al-Qaida were responsible for the crime. The assailants had not been identified by the end of period covered by this report.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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

The United States has worked with the TISA to promote human rights and religious and ethnic tolerance from the inclusion of minority groups in the Government and military to assistance in

the reconstruction of the country and its legal and political processes. During 2003 the United States provided \$600,000 (25,800,000 Afghani) for technical assistance and capacity building of the Human Rights Commission. The United States provided an additional \$5 million (215 million Afghani) to the commission during the reporting period. Embassy representatives meet daily with TISA officials and routinely with religious and minority figures in an ongoing dialogue regarding the political, legal, religious, and human rights context of the country's reconstruction.

U.S. officials supported efforts during the CLJ to include specific language in the draft Constitution to provide for equal rights for men and women and to incorporate moderate language on Islam.

The United States has also worked with civil society organizations to promote religious tolerance. The Civil Development Foundation, a group of reformist, largely Shi'a, citizens, continued to publish the monthly magazine, "Democracy," a project funded by a grant from the U.S. Embassy. "Democracy" has a circulation of approximately 3,000. One of the goals of "Democracy" is to challenge "religious despotism" and to promote a liberal and tolerant interpretation of Islam. Grants through USAID helped to establish independent community and commercial radio stations throughout the country that broadcast programs on a range of topics including democracy and human rights issues.

Between March and July, the U.S. Government funded a visit to the United States of 25 mullahs under a program on "Democracy and Civil Society." The approximate cost of this program was \$250,000 (10,750,000 Afghani).

During the reporting period, the U.S. Embassy donated approximately \$33,000 (1,419,000 Afghani) from the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation for restoration of the Mullah Mahmood Mosque in Kabul.

In at least one instance, U.S. officials met with and assisted an Afghan Christian allegedly being persecuted for his faith.

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