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Revised written statement* submitted by Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[21 August 2021]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



Evacuation of Religious Minorities of Afghanistan

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 We are a NGO that specializes in the freedom of religious minorities. This statement reports to the UN on the urgent need to evacuate the religious minorities of Afghanistan – namely the Sikhs and Hindus of Afghanistan, who face religious persecution and an immediate threat to their lives, following the takeover by the Taliban. We make this statement jointly with UNITED SIKHS, an international humanitarian and advocacy NGO that has been associated with the Department of Public Office of the United Nations, since 2007, and the Gurdwara Guru Nanak Darbar, London, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, which serves the largest Afghan Sikh congregation in the world.

1.2 We advocated for the protection and relocation of Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan in 2018 when we highlighted the plight of Afghan Sikh and Hindus at the 39th session of the UN Human Rights Council and at the pre-session of Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on Afghanistan, following a dastardly terrorist attack in Jalalabad that killed 12 Sikh leaders and one Hindu.¹

1.3 At a time when countries have closed their borders due to Covid 19, evacuation is the only hope for about 300 Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan who are now seeking refuge in the Karte Parvaan Gurdwara (Sikh place of congregational prayer) in Kabul, after fleeing from their homes with their sacred scriptures, before the Taliban seized the cities of Jalalabad and Ghazni in August 2021.

We urge the OHCHR to undertake the following:

1) Execute a specific plan administered by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) to immediately evacuate Afghan Sikh and Hindus and protect their places of worship, which are of historic significance. The safeguarding and maintenance of these historic shrines must be done in consultation with the Sikh and Hindu communities of Afghanistan.

2) Secure the relocation of Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan as protected persons in a safe country on humanitarian grounds, administered by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. The Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan need immediate protection and relocation to a safe country because there is no hope for their safety and security in Afghanistan as evidenced by the treatment of religious minorities at the height of the Taliban insurgency in the 90s. More recently, Sikhs and Hindus have not been safe since the 25th March 2020 attack on the congregation of a Sikh Gurdwara in Kabul, whose details are as follows:

1. During the Kabul Gurdwara attack on 25th March 2020, the assailants vowed to exterminate Sikhs if they don't leave Afghanistan.²

2. Three of the attackers escaped despite a heavy presence of Afghan security forces.

3. There were multiple explosions on 26th March 2020 on the route to the crematorium where Sikhs were conducting the funeral rites of their loved ones.

4. On 27th March 2020, explosive mines were found by Afghan Police near the Gurdwara Karte Parvaan in Kabul, which is now the refuge for Sikhs evacuated from the Gurdwara that was attacked.

5. Sikhs in Afghanistan have taken refuge in Gurdwaras since the Afghan Civil War in the 90s. However, the attack on the Gurdwara in Kabul has shown that the Gurdwaras are no longer a safe place for Sikhs.

¹ <https://adobe.ly/2yFHhVy>.

² <https://www.sikh24.com/2020/03/28/afghan-sikhs-asked-to-quit-afghanistan-within-10-days-or-get-ready-to-be-killed/#.XoBuYSXTWEc>.

Background

In the early 1990s there were more than 200,000 Sikhs and Hindus spread across Afghanistan, but as a result of over 30 years of unabated threats, kidnappings and attacks, the community has been reduced to under 150 families.

Background on Sikhs and Hindus of Afghanistan

History

Afghanistan, which has been described as a land of "rocks, sands, deserts, ice and snow", once had hundreds of thousands of Sikhs and Hindus who lived as thriving business people in every corner of Afghanistan and controlled most of the trade. Sikhs lived there since the founder of the Sikh religion, Guru Nanak Sahib, visited Afghanistan, more than 500 years ago.

The Soviet intervention of 1979 and the Civil War of 1992 saw their mass exodus to neighbouring India, the Islamic Republic of Iran and to a lesser extent, the West. Khajinder Singh, the late author of 'Sikhs of Kabul' (2001), says that in 1992 there were about 60,000 Sikhs in Afghanistan. Today, no more than 150 families and a few Hindus, constituting under 0.3% of the population, remain.

These people remain in Afghanistan because they did not have the resources to leave and/or they felt duty-bound to stay and protect the 65 historical Sikh Gurdwaras (place of worship) and 27 Hindu temples from the Taliban.

2. SAFETY AND SECURITY

2.1 In 2003, NATO took the lead of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. Mandated by the United Nations, ISAF's primary objective was to ensure Afghanistan would never again become a safe haven for terrorists. At the end of 2014, the ISAF mission ended.

2.2 The 1 July 2018 suicide bombing killed 13 community leaders of non-Muslim minorities and reignited a climate of desperation and terror. On March 25th 2020, 25 Sikhs, including women and a 3 yr old child, were killed by terrorists who attacked a Sikh congregation at a Kabul Gurdwara.

2.3 These events demonstrate a prevalence of violence and terror fueled by religious ideology and inflicted mainly upon the non-Muslim minority.

3. RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

3.1 Although the instability in Afghanistan has taken a disproportionately high toll on its religious minority communities, the issue does not appear in scholarship. The focus remains narrowly fixed on the strife between the Shia and Sunni sects of Islam and this perpetuates the assumption that Afghanistan is devoid of non-Muslims.

4. DEMOGRAPHY, RIGHTS, STATE AND SOCIETAL TREATMENT AND ATTITUDES

4.1 A memo of 6 August 2018 to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) from the Gurdwara Guru Nanak Darbar, London, says there are 64 Sikh Gurdwaras and 27 Hindu Mandirs in Afghanistan.

4.2 The recent takeover by the Taliban has ignited the fear of a return of societal ill-treatment and discrimination against Afghani Sikhs and Hindus as experienced during the height of the Taliban regime of the 90s. The Memo described life under the Taliban as follows:

- The situation in Afghanistan began to change in April 1992 when the Mujaheddin came to Afghanistan. The Taliban took over the movement in 1996 at Kandhar and moved to Kabul in 1997.

- The Taliban wanted to make Afghanistan an Islamic country by converting Sikhs/Hindus into the Islam faith.
- The Taliban began to inflict religious persecution on the Afghan Sikhs in numerous ways.
- Every Friday, Sikhs were not allowed to open their shops. They were expected to join prayers with the Taliban in Mosques.
- Those who resisted, were physically tortured and beaten up.
- Young Sikhs were not allowed to go to school. Their long hair was pulled and they were humiliated.
- Sikhs were not permitted to go to their religious places for daily prayers. Devoted Sikhs began to spend most of their times with their families in very limited area of the Sikh Gurdwara compound.
- The young Sikh and Hindu girls were kidnapped and were forced to marry Muslims. Taliban usually paid for brides.
- Sikhs were not allowed to cremate their dead ones openly. Sadly, they were forced to cremate within the Gurdwara compound.
- The authorities wouldn't entertain any complaints against Muslims. If found out, Sikhs were punished even more for complaining.

4.3 Even after the Taliban were pushed back by the NATO-ISAF troops, Sikhs and Hindus continue to receive adverse societal treatment and attitude.

4.4 UK writer Inderjeet Singh says in his book, "Rawail Singh summed up the miseries of the community (in an Al Jazeera interview in 2016): "There is only so much a community can tolerate. We can't practice our faith openly, our children can't go to school because of harassment; we can't even cremate our dead without being stoned by the public."

4.5 As one widow of the suicide bombing of 1 July 2018 told UNITED SIKHS' International Legal Director, Mejjindarpal Kaur - "We were always shaken whenever there was a terror attack. But this time we have been uprooted. We must leave now because they have killed our husbands and our community leaders."

UNITED SIKHS Gurdwara Guru Nanak Darbar, NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.