

Afghanistan: Minorities, Conflict and the Search for Peace

AN MRG INTERNATIONAL REPORT • AFGHANISTAN: MINORITIES, CONFLICT AND THE SEARCH FOR PEACE





*Tajik refugees, Sakhi camp,
Mazar-i-Sharif,
Afghanistan.*

STEVEN DUPONT/PANOS PICTURES

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Relevant international instruments

Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious or Linguistic Minorities, 18 December 1992

Article 1

1. States shall protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity.
2. States shall adopt appropriate legislative and other measures to achieve those ends.

Article 2

1. Persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities (hereinafter referred to as persons belonging to minorities) have the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, and to use their own language, in private and in public, freely and without interference or any form of discrimination.
2. Persons belonging to minorities have the right to participate effectively in cultural, religious, social, economic and public life.
3. Persons belonging to minorities have the right to participate effectively in decisions on the national and, where appropriate, regional level concerning the minority to which they belong or the regions in which they live, in a manner not incompatible with national legislation.
4. Persons belonging to minorities have the right to establish and maintain their own associations.
5. Persons belonging to minorities have the right to establish and maintain, without any discrimination, free and peaceful contacts with other members of their group and with persons belonging to other minorities, as well as contacts across frontiers with citizens of other States to whom they are related by national or ethnic, religious or linguistic ties.

Article 3

1. Persons belonging to minorities may exercise their rights, including those set forth in the present Declaration, individually as well as in community with other members of their group, without any discrimination.
2. No disadvantage shall result for any person belonging to a minority as the consequence of the exercise or non-exercise of the rights set forth in the present Declaration.

Article 4

1. States shall take measures where required to ensure that persons belonging to minorities may exercise fully and effectively all their human rights and fundamental freedoms without any discrimination and in full equality before the law.
2. States shall take measures to create favourable conditions to enable persons belonging to minorities to express their characteristics and to develop their culture, language, religion, traditions and customs, except where specific practices are in violation of national law and contrary to international standards.
3. States should take appropriate measures so that, wherever possible, persons belonging to minorities may have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue or to have instruction in their mother tongue.
4. States should, where appropriate, take measures in the field of education, in order to encourage knowledge of the history, traditions, language and culture of the minorities existing within their territory. Persons belonging to minorities should have adequate opportunities to gain knowledge of the society as a whole.
5. States should consider appropriate measures so that persons belonging to minorities may participate fully in the economic progress and development in their country.

Article 5

1. National policies and programmes shall be planned and implemented with due regard for the legitimate interests of persons belonging to minorities.
2. Programmes of cooperation and assistance among States should be planned and implemented with due regard for the legitimate interests of persons belonging to minorities.
(...)

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 16 December 1966

Article 12

1. Everyone lawfully within the territory of a State shall, within that territory, have the right to liberty of movement and freedom to choose his residence.

Article 18

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.
2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.
3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.
4. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.

Article 26

All persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law. In this respect, the law shall prohibit any discrimination and guarantee to all persons equal and effective protection against discrimination on any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 16 December 1966

Article 3

The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to ensure the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights set forth in the present Covenant.

Article 6

1. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right to work, which includes the right of everyone to the opportunity to gain his living by work which he freely chooses or accepts, and will take appropriate steps to safeguard this right.
2. The steps to be taken by a State Party to the present Covenant to achieve the full realization of this right shall include technical and vocational guidance and training programmes, policies and techniques to achieve steady economic, social and cultural development and full and productive employment under conditions safeguarding fundamental political and economic freedoms to the individual.

Article 13

1. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to education. They agree that education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity, and shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. They further agree that education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society, promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic or religious groups, and further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

Convention on the Rights of the Child, 20 November 1989

Article 2

1. States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.

Article 28

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular:
 - (a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all;
 - (b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need.
(...)

Preface

The US-led air strikes on Afghanistan that began on 7 October 2001 marked a tragic new phase in the country's history, but were only the latest episode in a conflict that has spanned over 20 years. With active superpower involvement throughout most of that period, the conflict has left Afghanistan's infrastructure devastated and its people consigned to the bottom of the United Nations' (UN) Human Development Indices.

It is rarely possible to understand the human rights situation in a country without an appreciation of the wider geo-political factors and regional interests at play, and this is particularly true of Afghanistan. Indeed, on many occasions over the last two decades, Afghanistan has seemed almost an amphitheatre in which regional and global powers and dissident groups have waged their struggle for strategic influence. This new Report, published by Minority Rights Group International (MRG), therefore situates Afghanistan squarely in its regional and international context, highlighting the degree to which the country's future depends on international restraint and concerted, sustained and long-term diplomatic action.

But achieving a durable peace also relies on Afghanistan's peoples and armed groups reaching an accommodation. It is here that Peter Marsden's Report makes its most significant contribution. He explains the political, social, religious and ethnic factors behind the country's recent history, debunking in the process some of the simplistic and stereotyped views so prevalent abroad. The systematic denial of women's rights, generally associated with the Taliban's interpretation of Islam, is in fact a much deeper phenomenon in Afghan society, most closely associated with the Pushtun tribe. At the same time, political killings and torture practised by those in power, often against members of ethnic and religious minority groups, are largely unreported.

The complex interaction of domestic conditions and foreign interests that led to the rise and dominance of the Taliban, as well as the impact of prolonged conflict on people's expectations and ambitions, are both crucial to an adequate understanding of the country's future prospects. So too is the manner in which the conflict has become in some respects ethnicized – again partly through foreign influences – as demonstrated most horrifically in the waves of killings carried out by the Northern Alliance and Taliban forces, in turn, following the abortive Taliban attempt on Mazar-i-Sharif in May 1997 and their successful conquest of the city in August 1998.

The scale of the humanitarian tragedy that befell Afghanistan in the wake of military strikes is difficult to describe adequately. Forgotten by the West, there were already over 1 million internally displaced people prior to 7 October 2001; less than three weeks later, the UN announced that 70 per cent of the population of the cities of Herat, Jalalabad and Kandahar had fled. Conditions in

makeshift refugee camps on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border were appalling. Wide areas of territory are littered with mines from previous stages in the conflict. The actual devastation of the lives of Afghan men, women and children can only be imagined.

On any analysis, it will be years before the people of Afghanistan can contemplate a safe and stable future, let alone a prosperous one. In that time, many thousands will die, through violence, preventable disease, or the simple absence of the basic requirements to sustain life. This Report ends with a series of recommendations from MRG, to the states engaged in the conflict, to countries of refuge, and to the international community, which are essential to prevent the escalation or perpetuation of conflict that will endanger many more civilian lives and provoke further flights of refugees.

Foremost among the recommendations is that any political proposals for the future of Afghanistan must take into account the interests of all ethnic groups and main religious minorities, include their active participation and provide for their appropriate representation in government. In addition, the international community must make a long-term commitment to the reconstruction of the country, in cooperation with Afghan communities. In the immediate future there is a pressing duty on the international community to coordinate the provision of humanitarian aid and to prevent its delivery being disrupted by military action. Finally, all countries – including those in the West – should honour their obligations under the UN Refugee Convention and provide a safe haven to refugees from Afghanistan fleeing persecution.

Mark Lattimer

Director

November 2001

Introduction

The last major Report on Afghanistan published by Minority Rights Group International (MRG), in 1992, was entitled *Afghanistan: A Nation of Minorities*. With no ethnic group making up more than half of the population, the dynamics between Afghanistan's different minorities, twisted by war, need careful explanation and are key to the country's future prospects.

The complexities of Afghanistan cannot, of course, only be understood in the context of the interrelationship between the various minorities within it. There are inevitably many other forces that come into play, not least the geo-politics of the region, relations between the Islamic world and the West, and the role of the illegal economy. However, the position of minorities has, historically, been an important determinant. This Report represents an attempt to consider the minority question through various prisms and the interrelationship between this and the wider picture.

In considering the question of minorities in Afghanistan, we have first to reflect on whether one can talk in terms of any given group constituting a majority. On ethnic grounds, there is no single group which has represented more than 50 per cent of the population, even though the largest group, the Pushtuns, has tended to play a dominant role.

If we look at religion, on the other hand, we can say that the overwhelming majority is Muslim and that the major part of the population which adheres to Islam espouses Sunni Islam. Shi'as, who can be differentiated from Sunnis on the basis of a particular view of the appropriate succession to Mohammed and of specific ritual arising from this view, are a very definite minority in Afghanistan but can look for support to Iran, where the Shi'a code prevails.

Another majority is language-based, with Dari, a variant of Persian, being spoken by all the non-Pushtuns.

It is more difficult to determine whether men or women can be regarded as the majority in terms of gender identity, particularly as men are more likely to have died in the conflicts of the past 22 years than women. However, women are generally acknowledged as being disadvantaged within society and this disadvantage has been particularly pronounced in Afghanistan. It is therefore important that we examine how they have been affected by developments in the country.

The conflicts have also impacted differentially on children and have added markedly to the population of people affected by disability. We should also look at these groups, who often suffer multiple discrimination.

The major debates on political and gender issues have produced strong and often extreme reactions, and we have seen the emergence of regimes of a totalitarian nature which have sought to impose their particular visions on the population and which have been intolerant

of dissent. As a consequence, we should also consider the intellectual or professional element in society who, to the extent that their views have been at odds with those of the regime in power, have found themselves targeted and subjected to imprisonment, torture or death. Hundreds of thousands have fled into exile.

The nature of Afghanistan

It may be useful, before we consider the complexities of Afghanistan, if we form an overview of its characteristics and of its recent history.

The economy

Afghanistan is predominantly a mountainous desert which may be considered an extension of the Iranian plateau. The Hindu Kush range, which largely separates the north from the south, commences some 200 km from the Iranian border and extends up to the extreme north-east, where the peaks rise to around 7,470 metres as they approach the Himalayan massif. Life is sustained through isolated river valleys and scattered oases.

The Afghan economy can be described as subsistence-based, with irrigated and rain-fed wheat grown alongside barley, grapes, olives and pistachios in various locations where the desert character of the country permits cultivation. There has also been a strong dependence on pasture in the upland areas, with livestock an important component in the survival of a high proportion of families.

Before 1978, what little trade and industry existed was largely agriculture-related with dried fruits and pistachios important components of the small export market. In addition, for a brief period, income was earned from the export, to the Soviet Union, of natural gas from the gas fields at Shiberghan to the west of Mazar.

The destruction caused by the period of Soviet occupation is estimated to have halved agricultural production. Efforts by farmers to reconstruct agriculture since then have been severely undermined by the removal from production of some of the most fertile areas, as a result of conflict. The effect of the drought that has devastated agriculture in the west, north and south of the country in 2000 and 2001 has been aggravated by the collapse of the infrastructure and by ongoing fighting.

Smuggling has been an important element in the economy since the beginning of this century, if not before, and it appears to have increased in scale in recent years based on the Afghan Transit Trade (ATT) agreement with Pakistan, which allows goods to cross Pakistan into Afghanistan duty free. Large smugglers' markets have developed over the years in the border areas, providing an important source of income for Pushtuns on both sides of the border; and it is interesting that the Pakistan government met with fierce resistance when, in 2000, it attempted to require traders in these markets to levy tax on the goods they sold. However, the government sought to clamp down on the use of the ATT by progressively limiting the goods that can cross Pakistan duty free. Partly in response to this, traders resorted to bringing in goods from Dubai and Central Asia, with tyres and electronic goods the dominant items. This was partly constrained by recent UN sanctions, which prohibit flights into and out of the country, but other routes, for instance across the bor-

der with Iran near Herat, came into use to compensate.

Afghanistan is a major source of opium and heroin. Production was fuelled by the war with the Soviet occupying forces, with certain Mujahidin leaders rumoured to be heavily involved in the trade, but it rose very significantly following the emergence of the Taliban, who levied a tax on production. Opium production in 1999 reached a record high of 4,600 metric tonnes, equivalent to 75 per cent of global production, and fell to 3,275 metric tonnes in 2000, largely as a result of the serious drought in that year. The Taliban leader issued an edict in July 2000 banning the production of opium during the following Islamic year, reportedly in response to his concerns over growing usage within Afghanistan, and this ban was renewed in July 2001. Although the ban was clearly being complied with, there was no certainty that production would not restart when the stockpiles created by the surpluses of earlier years found their way into the market.

Efforts need to be made to find alternative sources of income for both the farmers who used to grow opium and the large number of seasonal labourers who were regularly helping in the harvest. The UN Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention reported in 1999 that morphine and heroin laboratories operated in southern Afghanistan and in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area. It is not clear whether the Taliban are deriving any revenue from these.

The major producing areas have been Helmand, in southern Afghanistan, producing half the supply, and Nangarhar, in the east of the country, producing a further 25 per cent. Both of these are in the Pushtun area of the country.

Iran and Pakistan were the major trafficking routes for opium and heroin for many years but, largely in response to increased border control measures introduced by Iran, the Central Asian Republics and other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries have recently become an increasingly important route to Europe.

Another element in the illegal economy has been the smuggling of Afghanistan's scarce timber reserves into Pakistan. This has occurred on a huge scale but the Taliban have stated that they have taken action to clamp down on this trade. Similarly, the lapis lazuli mined in the northeast reaches Pakistan through informal channels.

An historical outline

Afghanistan's present borders have only existed for the past century and, previously, the territory that is currently constituted as Afghanistan was part of shifting empires which linked it, at one time or another, with Persia, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East. Trade has brought it into contact with the Arabian peninsula, China and beyond, and, through Islam, it has a common identity with the Middle East and the wider Islamic world. To this day, it sits uneasily between these

neighbouring regions, unsure as to where its identity lies in relation to each.

This independence was particularly evident when Afghanistan emerged as a buffer state between nineteenth-century Russia and British India after various abortive attempts by both Moscow and London to exert control over its internal affairs.

The recent history of Afghanistan has been determined, to a significant degree, by conquests undertaken in the middle of the eighteenth century by a particular Pushtun leader from Kandahar, Ahmed Shah Durrani. This established a pattern through which Pushtuns from a particular tribal sub-group would seek to achieve dominance over other Pushtuns and other ethnic groups. This pattern was reinforced at the end of the nineteenth century when Amir Abdur-Rahman (r. 1880–1901) recovered ground lost by his predecessors and achieved a *de facto* occupation of Afghanistan within its present borders which was legitimized by agreements with Tsarist Russia and British India in 1891, 1893, 1895 and 1896. His rule was notable for particularly harsh treatment of the Hazara population and for the creation of Pushtun colonies in non-Pushtun areas of the north.

Relative stability over the following decades facilitated internal debates, at least within the elite, over the nature of the political system and over issues such as the role of religion in the state and the rights of women, which were being actively explored elsewhere in the world. These debates inevitably met with negative reactions from the conservative traditional and religious leadership in the country, and the overthrow of King Amanullah in 1929 was a direct consequence of such a backlash. This particular episode was of interest in that the rebellion was led by a Tajik, Habibullah II, who took on the presidency. He was ousted after less than a year in power by the Pushtun establishment. It was not until the liberal movements that were sweeping the world from the 1950s onwards also hit Afghanistan that much of a shift in thinking was in evidence. Consistent with the global trend, radical movements began to emerge in intellectual circles during the 1960s and two of these, one looking to the Soviet socialist model and the other drawing on Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, became increasingly active during the 1970s. Both movements suffered the inevitable fragmentation process, with ethnicity one of the determining factors. Thus, the socialist movement split between two distinct groups – the Parchamis who were from the Persian-speaking urbanized and cultured elite, and the Khalqis who drew largely on newly educated Pushtuns from the rural areas.

The Soviet invasion

The 1978 coup by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was a consequence of the pre-eminent position that the socialist movement achieved. This was, in large part, a result of strong support from the Soviet Union, which had worked hard to establish a significant economic, political and military foothold in Afghanistan over the previous 20 years or so. When this was threatened by popular uprisings in response to a

reform programme imposed by the PDPA on the population, it opted to invade Afghanistan in December 1979.

A key factor in the decision of the Soviet Union to invade, in addition to its fear that it might lose its, by now, substantial interests in Afghanistan, was that it would be vulnerable to the USA exploiting popular unrest and seeking to establish a military presence in Afghanistan. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran had deprived the USA of its military bases in that country and the Soviet Union was concerned that any US military presence in Afghanistan would threaten its southern frontier.

The various Islamist parties, many of which had been exiled to Pakistan prior to 1978, took the opportunity of the uprisings, which increased following the Soviet invasion, to claim leadership of the resistance movement. They were assisted in this by both overt and covert support from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the USA, and took on the name of the Mujahidin by virtue of their involvement in a *jihad*, or holy war, against the Soviet Union.

Pakistan also saw an opportunity in the Soviet invasion to pursue its own strategic interests by working to establish a friendly government in Kabul. To this end, it provided intensive support to a particular Pushtun Mujahidin party, Hisb-e-Islami, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, in the expectation that, if this highly radical party gained power, it would owe greater allegiance to fellow radicals in Pakistan than to the Pushtun tribes, who could be relied upon to maintain their independence of Pakistan.

The growing localized resistance to the PDPA reforms and the subsequent Soviet invasion led the government to lose control over much of the countryside and to be largely confined to the urban areas. The military offensives undertaken by Soviet forces also provoked a large-scale exodus of the population from the rural areas, with 3 million heading for camps in Pakistan and almost 3 million, primarily Persian-speakers, seeking refuge in Iran. Many others sought internal exile, some having to survive in caves in the mountains with minimal access to food and shelter.

When the socialist government collapsed in April 1992, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union itself in 1991 and of the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan three years earlier, Pakistan sought to orchestrate the formation of a Mujahidin government.

However, it had to take account of the *de facto* occupation, at this point, of northern Afghanistan and of parts of Kabul, by various minority ethnic groups other than the Pushtuns. These sought to take advantage of the power vacuum by attempting to achieve a reversal of the previous Pushtun dominance of power, a dominance which had been brought even more into question by the fact that proportionately more Pushtuns than minority ethnic groups had left the country since the Soviet invasion.

Overtures by the Tajik commander, Ahmed Shah Masoud, who led the initial takeover of Kabul, to the various Pushtun Mujahidin parties to form a coalition government, were met with a military rebuff from Pakistan's protégé, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Over the following three years, fighting between the various Mujahidin groups reduced much of Kabul to rubble and it was the failure of Hekmatyar, in particular, to achieve leadership of a Mujahidin government that may have led Pakistan to lend

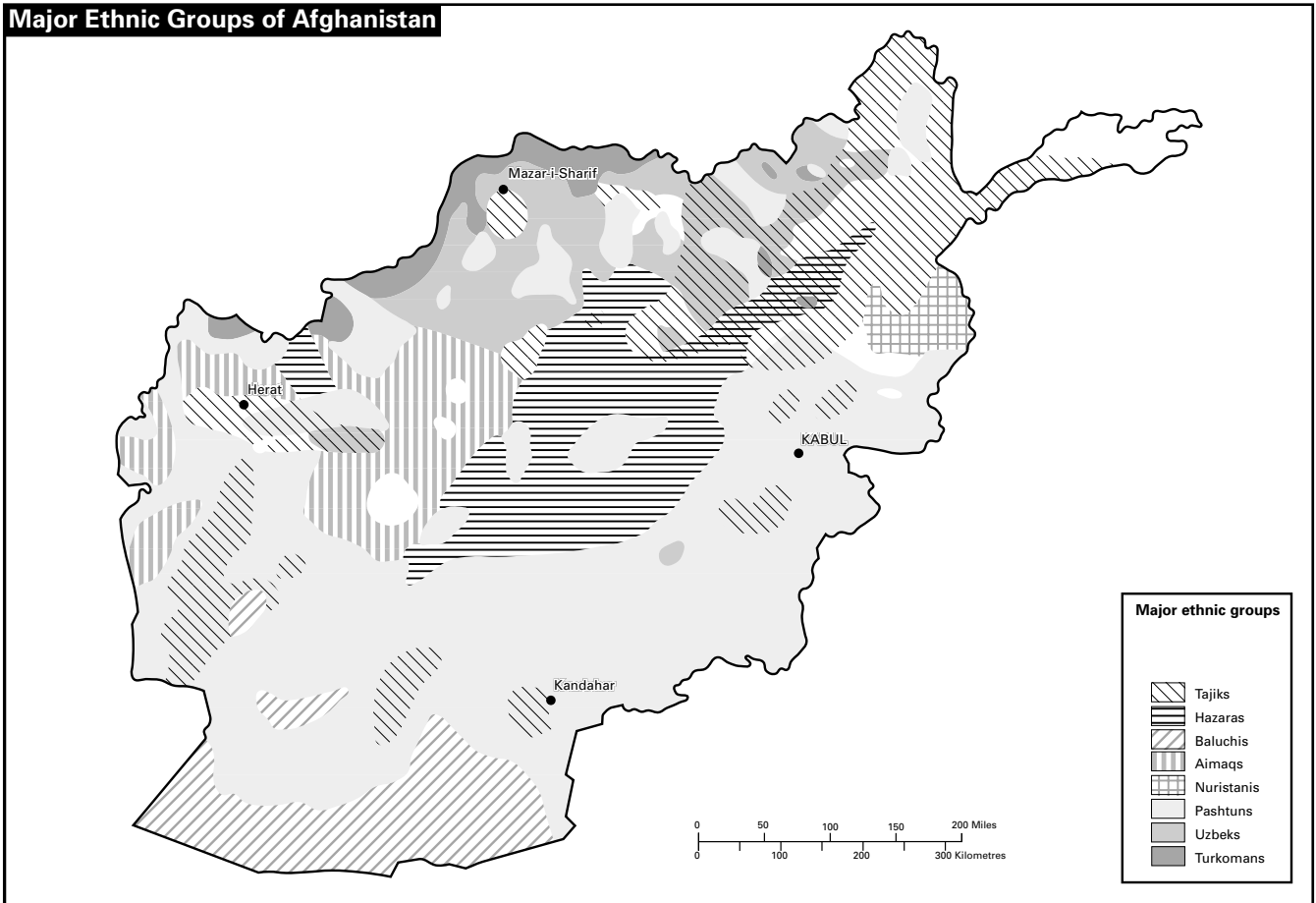
support to a new movement, that of the Taliban.

The Taliban, many of whom had been educated in Islamic *madrasahs* in Pakistan, were certainly well received in the Pushtun areas when they conquered southern Afghanistan over the autumn and winter of 1994/5, almost without a fight, but their subsequent occupations of the non-Pushtun areas generated new conflict and repeated the pattern established by Amir Abdur-Rahman of Pushtun dominance over other ethnic groups. The extreme conservatism and puritanism of the movement led significant sections of the population, particularly women in the urban areas, to find their rule extremely onerous.

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon of 11 September 2001, and the subsequent military intervention by the USA and UK in Afghanistan, have injected new complexities into the Afghan equation. The implications of these major developments are discussed later in the Report.

It is important to note that established authorities on Afghanistan give widely divergent estimates as to the ethnic composition of Afghanistan. The figures in Box 1 must therefore be regarded as approximations. These figures, which represent the situation before the Afghan conflict, indicate that Pushtuns then constituted a relatively high percentage (45.75 per cent) of a population of 15,300,000. The population is now thought to be in the region of 24 million but it is difficult to estimate the present ethnic composition, with each ethnic group asserting that it is numerically stronger than it probably is and with more than a million Pushtuns still in Pakistan and a similar number of predominantly Persian-speakers remaining in Iran.

Major Ethnic Groups of Afghanistan



Afghanistan and its neighbours



Characteristics of the Afghanistan population

Ethnic groups

There is always much controversy when the question of ethnicity is debated amongst Afghans, with many asserting that a majority of the population would continue to identify themselves as Afghan rather than by their ethnic identity and others insisting that ethnicity is an increasingly important element in the conflict. This controversy also extends to Pakistan's involvement, with apparent support for the Taliban from Pakistani Pushtuns in the tribal belt, and from amongst the Pushtun intelligentsia and military, some of whom have previous connections with the Soviet-backed regime.

Some elements of the significance of ethnicity historically have been covered in the introduction but the events since 1992, in particular, have brought this more sharply into focus. It may be useful, therefore, to look separately at ethnicity in the context of the Mujahidin government of 1992–6 and of the Taliban period since 1994. The possible implications, in this context, of the US-led military intervention that began in October 2001, are considered later.

First, it is important to note the relationship of each ethnic group to the territory that it occupies and the relationship between the territory held and the relative power that each ethnic group enjoys.

The Pushtuns

The Pushtuns occupy a belt of mountains that extend for much of the border with Pakistan, finally disappearing into the Registan Desert to the southwest of Kandahar. This terrain has enabled them to engage in a lucrative smuggling trade into Pakistan. The Pushtuns have also benefited from the relatively fertile land in the Helmand River valley, the oasis of Kandahar, the Kabul River valley passing through Jalalabad in the east of the country and many other fertile valleys in the southeast of the country. Pushtuns also own land in some of the more fertile areas of northern Afghanistan such as Kunduz, following a colonization process at the end of the nineteenth century. In thus being able to draw primarily on irrigated wheat for their survival, they are at an advantage relative to other ethnic groups, which have to depend on a combination of rain-fed and irrigated wheat. The nomadic population of Afghanistan is predominantly Pushtun and there has been competition, historically, between these nomads and the Hazaras of central Afghanistan for pastureland. The state has tended to favour the nomads, with land being expropriated for their benefit. However, the Soviet occupation allowed the Haz-

aras greater autonomy and they were able to recover much of this grazing land. More recently, Pushtun nomads have begun to claim their previous grazing rights. The Taliban were reported, at one point, to have taken care to ensure some balance between their interests and those of the Hazaras, for fear of alienating the Hazara population and leading them to support the opposition. However, more recent reports suggested that the interests of the nomads predominated over those of the Hazaras.

The Pushtuns organize their affairs and their relationships through tribal and clan structures and through a code of conduct known as Pushtunwali, which puts a strong emphasis on tribal honour and revenge. Pushtunwali is at variance with Islam in placing even greater restrictions on female mobility – and therefore access to education, employment and health care – through the institution of *pardah*.

Hazaras and Tajiks

The western half of the central Hindu Kush range is largely occupied by the Shi'a Hazaras and the east by the Tajiks. The conditions for growing crops are extremely difficult throughout the Hindu Kush, rendering both the Hazaras and the Tajiks relatively poor, although the Tajiks have had access to important areas of fertile land in the Shomali valley to the north of Kabul and in the adjacent Panjshir valley.

The Hazaras are thought to be of Turkic origin and are possibly descendants of the Mongol or Turkic hordes which were organized in units of thousands and were settled in the area by the Timurids (in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries). The area was later occupied by the Persian Safavids (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) and much of the population adopted Twelver Shi'ism, a particular creed within Shi'a Islam.

The term 'Tajik' has tended to be used for all Persian-speaking Sunnis who are not of Turkic origin and Tajiks therefore have a less pronounced identity than the other groups. Prior to the 1978 coup, Tajiks were disproportionately represented within the government bureaucracy because of their knowledge of Persian. In the absence of records, we can only speculate as to what the post-1978 situation might be, although there is a significantly diminished government service and the Taliban replaced many senior officials with Pushtuns.

Hazaras, in contrast, have traditionally been marginalized, politically and economically, and have normally undertaken the most menial tasks within the economy. This marginalization has been very much resented by the Hazara population.

Turkomans and Uzbeks

To the northwest of the Hindu Kush are the rolling hills of Badghis, where the Turkomans struggle to survive on rain-fed wheat. The Turkomans of Afghanistan originate in the Turkic tribes of Central Asia and came to Afghanistan as refugees in the 1920s and 1930s, along with many thousands of Uzbeks, to escape suppression by the Soviet Union of the Basmachi revolt by Islamic rebels. They brought with them *qarakul* sheep and the Turkoman rug industry.

To the east of Badghis is the desert of Faryab and the flat plain which extends northwards into Central Asia, which, until recently, permitted an important agricultural and trading economy to develop. The population of this area is also predominantly Uzbek and, like the Turkomans, is of Turkic origin, although there are, as noted above, important Pushtun colonies. The economy of this area has been badly affected by the Taliban conquest of 1998 following the consequent closure of the border with Uzbekistan by the Uzbek government and the resulting loss of trade.

Ismailis

The Shi'a Ismaili community has its base to the immediate north and northwest of the Salang Pass, which takes the main Kabul–Mazar-i-Sharif highway over the Hindu Kush range. In October 2001, the Pass was held by opposition forces, while the Taliban controlled the area previously ruled by the local Ismaili leadership. Ismaili communities are also intermingled amongst the Hazaras and Tajiks, with significant numbers in the extreme northeast of the country.

Baluchis

The Baluchis occupy the inhospitable no-man's land of high sand dunes and a black stony desert near the borders of Iran and Pakistan in the extreme southeast of the country, which has facilitated their role in the smuggling of opium into Iran. Many are semi-nomadic.

Brahui

The Brahui also live in the south and southwest of Afghanistan and practise agriculture and animal husbandry. Many work as tenant farmers for Baluchis, and they often refer to themselves as a Baluchi sub-group.

Nuristanis

The Nuristanis exist in particular isolated valleys to the south of Badakshan in eastern Afghanistan, each with its own language and culture, and can trace their ancestry back to the armies of Alexander the Great. They were forcibly converted to Islam from their previous polytheism by Amir Abdur-Rahman in the late nineteenth century, when Kafiristan, as it was known, took on the name of Nuristan. They survive primarily on goat herding.

Farsiwan

Along the border with Iran are the Farsiwan, who are Imami Shi'a. This group, who are mainly agriculturalists, are also to be found in Ghazni, Herat, Kandahar and other southern and western towns.

Qizilbash

The Qizilbash are a small minority, who are also Imami Shi'a. Most of these used to live in the urban areas, where they worked in senior bureaucratic and professional posts. With the departure of so many educated people since the 1978 coup, as a result of the various purges, outbreaks of conflict and the negative responses to Taliban policies and practice, it is possible that this group has declined significantly.

Aimaqs

The Aimaqs are Turkic in origin and are to be found in the westernmost part of the Hindu Kush, to the west of the Hazarajat.

Box 1 Population of the main ethnic groups, 1979

Pushtuns	7,000,000	Concentrated in the south and southeast but settled in most regions
Tajiks	3,500,000	North, northeast and Kabul region
Hazaras	1,500,000	Centre (Hazarajat) and Kabul
Uzbeks	1,300,000	North
Aimaqs	800,000	West
Farsiwan, Heratis	600,000	West and south
Turkomans	300,000	North
Brahui	100,000	Southwest
Baluchis	100,000	Southwest
Nuristanis	100,000	East

Religious affiliation

The Sunni population, comprising the Baluchis, Pushtuns, Tajiks, Turkomans and Uzbeks, for the most part, all adhere to the Hanafi School while the Shi'as are divided between the Imami Shi'as (part of the Hazara population, together with the Farsiwan and the Qizilbash) and the Ismaili Shi'as (part of the Hazara and Tajik populations, together with several thousand people living in the Pamirs, the high peaks of Badakshan). There used to be a strong Sufi, or mystic, tradition in Afghanistan which, in latter years, was very much linked to two traditionalist Mujahidin leaders, Pir Gailani and Sibghatullah Mujadidi. Sufism was not tolerated by the Taliban and it is likely that, with the departure into exile of these two men, its practice has largely died out.

In addition to the Muslim population, about 20,000 Hindus and 10,000 Sikhs have worked in the cities of Afghanistan as traders, merchants and moneylenders. They have also had a major role in the money market. The intensity of the conflict in Kabul, from 1992 to 1996, led a majority of the Hindus and Sikhs to leave the country, primarily for India, or to move to relatively safe areas such as Jalalabad.

The Hindu and Sikh populations have been able to practise their respective religious beliefs, rituals and festivals without any official constraints. However, the arbitrary nature of rule since 1992 has often acted as a *de facto* constraint because of the climate of fear. The Taliban twice announced that they would require Sikhs and Hindus to wear yellow pieces of cloth to enable the religious police to differentiate them from Muslims and so not enforce the behavioural codes imposed on the Muslim population. However, they failed to act on the first announcement and, in relation to the edict issued in early 2001, they stated that they would consult with Hindus and Sikhs regarding an appropriate form of identification.

Although there is a Christian church in Kabul, this has historically catered for the expatriate community and Afghan Christians have been extremely few in number. It is now regarded as a capital offence for any Muslim to convert to Christianity.

Language and culture

The ethnic divide has also been a linguistic one, with the Pushtun population speaking Pashto and the other ethnic groups, together with the urban elites, speaking Dari, a dialect of Persian. There are also a number of minority languages, notably Turkic spoken by the Turkoman and Uzbek populations. Persian has been used as the language of government.

A clear distinction can be drawn between the tribal cultures of the Pushtuns and Turkomans and the less structured cultural outlooks of the Tajiks and Hazaras. It is of interest that, historically, the Herat River valley has remained relatively aloof from the ethnic divide, having built up an ethnically diverse population and one that has developed a level of cultural sophistication through its prominence in music, poetry and the visual arts, including miniaturism.

Political power relationships

The heads of state from 1933 to 1979 were members of the Muhammadzai clan of the Barakzai tribe within the Durrani confederation, one of the three major groups of Pushtun tribes. The Muhammadzais were pre-eminent in the social hierarchy, followed by the other Durrani and the rest of the Pushtun population. Next in order came the ethnic groups that were predominantly Sunni, with Persian-speaking Tajiks tending to take priority over Uzbeks, among whom both Persian and Turkic dialects were spoken. Shi'as, most of them Hazaras, were largely excluded from government.

The successive presidents of the Soviet-backed government of 1978–92 were also Pushtun but from the Ghilzai confederation of eastern Afghanistan. The Taliban leadership again came from the Durrani confederation, thus reasserting their traditional dominance. With the government administration now so depleted, it is of little relevance to talk of the relative power within it of particular non-Pushtun groups.

Cross-border ethnicity

We need to look wider than the present boundaries in considering the ethnic characteristics of Afghanistan. The present frontiers cut across ethnic lines in all directions so that there are Pushtuns in equal numbers either side of the Pakistan border, Tajiks looking across the border to Tajikistan, Uzbeks and Turkomans doing likewise in relation to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and Baluchis straddling the borders of Iran and Pakistan in the southwest. There are thus strong cultural influences from the wider region, particularly from ancient Persia and Central Asia, as well as the adjacent areas of the Arabian subcontinent currently within the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman and Saudi Arabia, whose tribal traditions bear many similarities to those of the Pushtuns.

The presence of significant Pushtun populations on both sides of the border with Pakistan has been an important source of tension between the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan since 1947, when, in response to the partition of British India into India and Pakistan, Afghanistan argued that the predominantly Pushtun tribal territories of Pakistan should have been given the option of territorial independence as the nation of Pushtunistan, with the hope, perhaps, that this might be absorbed into Afghanistan. These tensions were particularly acute in 1961, when Pakistan, in order to divert popular opinion away from its failure on other fronts, took the opportunity of incursions by Afghan tribal elements into Pakistan to provoke a crisis, accusing the Afghan government of supporting the incursions and cutting diplomatic relations. Although these tensions have been relatively dormant since that time, the fear that Afghanistan might encourage a secessionary movement in the Pushtun areas of Pakistan has been a key element in Pakistan's Afghan policy and has been one of the factors in its seeking to establish a friendly and compliant regime in Kabul.

The humanitarian situation

Life has never been easy for those struggling to eke out a living through subsistence agriculture and the 20 years of conflict, combined with the worst drought for 30 years, have reduced tens of thousands, if not millions of people, to the very margins of survival. The US-led military intervention has seriously increased the vulnerability of the population because of the difficulties that humanitarian agencies have consequently faced in gaining access to the areas worst affected by the drought. Prior to the intervention, of the 24 million currently estimated by the UN to be living in Afghanistan, around 1 million were displaced by fighting or had moved away from their homes to other villages, or to the urban areas, in the hope that they would find some means, albeit meagre, of survival. Many of these have opted to return to their villages in response to the military attacks on the cities, in spite of the very uncertain food situation. The risk that large numbers will die from starvation or from epidemics is very high.

Aid, displaced people and refugees

The current efforts of humanitarian agencies to get aid to the areas worst affected by the drought are subject to considerable uncertainty. The key consideration is whether aid personnel can operate securely in the various parts of the country and, therefore, whether food convoys can reach the target areas and the food can be effectively distributed. A further factor is that frustrations and anxieties over food shortages may provoke disturbances or unmanageable concentrations of displaced people in the urban areas.

There may, therefore, be strong pressures on the borders of Pakistan and Iran which, as many expect, will again be resisted. Pakistan effectively sealed its border in January 2001, after 170,000 people sought refuge in Pakistan between September 2000 and January 2001; 80,000 of these arrived to find that Pakistan was no longer willing to host refugees from Afghanistan and was embarking on forcible deportations. Most of these were ethnic Tajiks fleeing the Taliban process of conquest in the northeast and it therefore appeared that this refusal was motivated by a pro-Pushtun bias and by pro-Taliban sympathies. Following intensive international pressure, Pakistan agreed, in August 2001, to a process aimed at identifying those in need of protection within this influx.

There have been many earlier episodes in which people found themselves on the move to other parts of the country or into external exile. More than 3 million fled to Pakistan during the period of Soviet occupation and

although almost 2 million have returned to Afghanistan since 1992 under the UNHCR repatriation programme, many of these found the conditions too difficult and have since gone back to Pakistan. Pakistan has also had to accept new waves of refugees in response to particularly intense periods in the post-1992 conflict. Iran accepted a total of 2.9 million refugees during the war with the Soviet occupying forces and has continued to receive both refugees and economic migrants. It has been frustrated at the relatively slow pace of the repatriation to Afghanistan, however, and, in recent years, has placed considerable pressure on Afghans to return. The official figure for the number of Afghans in Iran is 1.8 million, reflecting new influxes in response to the drought. The pressures on Afghans in Iran to return have increased since new legislation was introduced in June 2001, which prohibited the employment of Afghans and imposed a fine on employers for doing so.

Although a minority of Afghans have managed to develop businesses in exile, particularly in Pakistan, daily life for the vast majority of Afghans living in both Pakistan and Iran is extremely tough, with men relying on intermittent daily labouring and women receiving minimal payment for repetitive work undertaken in the home such as wool cleaning, ironing, embroidery and pistachio-shelling.

The period since the US air strikes on Afghanistan of August 1998, which resulted from the bombings of the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam and accusations by the USA that the Saudi, Osama bin Laden, was implicated, has seen a significant increase in the number of Afghans seeking asylum in Europe, North America and Australia. For the most part, these have been intellectuals and professionals who felt vulnerable to possible targeting as a consequence of the radicalization process that the air strikes and subsequent UN sanctions engendered. In addition, growing numbers decided to leave the region because of forced recruitment by Taliban and opposition forces. The recent pattern whereby the Pakistan police engaged in arbitrary arrests of Afghans on the streets of Pakistan and deported them to Afghanistan accelerated this trend.

Large Afghan communities have thus emerged in Canada and the USA, which have generous resettlement programmes, and in Europe, notably in Germany. More recently, the UK and the Netherlands have been the preferred destinations within Europe, but Afghans currently seeking asylum are having to do so within an increasingly hostile political environment. This is clearly regrettable, given the conditions that they are fleeing.

Humanitarian agencies, including UN bodies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), have taken the

major responsibility for the provision of essential services in Afghanistan, including health care, water supply, sanitation, education, agricultural support and emergency assistance. They have had to provide these services in a situation in which the various authorities have opted to put the vast majority of the resources available to them into the war effort and neglected the state infrastructure to the point where it barely functions. The agencies have thus been placed in a difficult position in having to determine appropriate mechanisms for working alongside what is left of the state infrastructure.

Education

The involvement of NGOs in education has always been politically sensitive. This, combined with resource constraints, has tended to limit their involvement to the provision of primary education. The virtual absence of secondary and tertiary education since 1992 means that there is no new generation of educated people emerging to replace the large number of professionals and intellectuals who have left the country. The *madrrasah* education of those currently in power has not been sufficiently broad to create the climate of tolerance that is needed if Afghanistan is to recover in the long term. The fact that the Taliban invested in the creation of new *madrasahs* rather than broad-based education is, therefore, a matter for serious concern. Afghans working for humanitarian agencies now represent the most significant cadre of educated Afghans left in the region.

It should be stressed that NGOs have set out to provide for all sections of Afghan society and have worked hard to bring together people from different ethnic communities where common interests in, for example, an irrigation system or neighbourhood services, have facilitated this. NGOs have been particularly effective in improving the access of women and girls to education and health care, in spite of the restrictions in force, through patient negotiation with the local authorities.

Landmines

Afghanistan has been one of the most heavily land-mined countries in the world. In addition to the large number of mines laid by the occupying Soviet forces, the opposition forces fighting the Taliban over the past five years have continued to lay mines as an important element in their defence strategy. The Taliban showed themselves ready to build on the willingness of their footsoldiers to seek martyrdom in allowing them to move forward in large numbers across known minefields. This strategy put conscripts at particular risk.

The UN has put considerable energy into mine-surveying, mine-clearance and mine-awareness programmes, assisted by generous contributions from donor governments. However, after over 10 years of programming, it is proving more difficult to secure donor support and, in 2000, it was necessary to halve the programme part way through the year because of shortfalls in the required

funding.

The UN mine-clearance programmes, contracted out to Afghan NGOs for the most part, have been effective in clearing the major roads, urban areas, canals and cultivated land of mines. The mine survey teams have marked out the military positions with red-painted stones and this will provide some protection.

However, there are continuing casualties from mine accidents amongst civilians and fighters on a daily basis. Children have been particularly vulnerable to mine accidents. This was noted in an excellent report produced by the Save the Children Federation (SCF) in May 1998 on the impact of the Afghan conflict on children. This demonstrated that few children remained unscarred by the war and that a majority had seen family members killed. The report commented that mines represented a particular threat to young boys in urban residential environments, to adolescent boys in mined rural areas and to nomadic Kuchi children, whose migration routes crossed mined areas. Polio has been another major cause of disability although the UN has now virtually eradicated the disease through mass vaccination programmes.

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It is also clear from the SCF report that children were having to play a major role in securing an income for their families by collecting waste items that they could sell, by begging and by engaging in street trading. This was said to be particularly the case in families in which there was no adult male or the main breadwinner was unable to work due to disability. In such households, there was a more marked reliance on child labour, and the eldest son would often have to take responsibility for the family's survival.

It was also noted that there was a tendency for households in which all the adults were women to send their children to orphanages, knowing that they would be fed and clothed and given some small allowances. Although orphanages exist for girls, there were more opportunities for boys to be placed. In particular, the orphanages attached to Islamic *madrasahs* and to political organizations have drawn on the concern of the poorest families to reduce the number of mouths they have to feed. The products of these *madrasahs* have contributed to the fighting forces of the Taliban.

The extremely high level of displacement was said, in

the report, to be a further factor in children having to be economically resourceful while families made the difficult adjustment to new circumstances. Regrettably, this level of economic vulnerability had encouraged many young men to fight for one military group or another in return for some form of remuneration.

The report noted that boys could also be vulnerable, by virtue of their ethnicity, if their home area was captured or if they were required to assist in its defence. They might, in addition, find themselves unwilling pawns in military campaigns orchestrated by neighbouring states, forced recruitment to the Pakistan-supported initiatives of the Taliban being the most obvious example. It should be noted, in this context, that there have been conflicting reports as to whether the Taliban have used children for armed combat.

Of major concern, also, was the decline in opportunities for children, particularly girls, to develop through education and skills training. Attention was drawn to the risks that mothers, very many of whom would be in their early teens, were incurring in relation to pre-natal and post-natal care, as a result of the Taliban restrictions on female training and employment in the health sector and on female access to health care.

Looking to the medium or long term, much will depend on whether stability can be achieved at the local level in the different areas of the country. If this can be realized, humanitarian agencies will be able to mitigate the effects of the drought in the affected areas and reduce migratory flows to the cities. Similarly, refugees from neighbouring countries would be able to return in safety and security. Any such stability would need to be reasonably sustainable for further humanitarian crises to be avoided but, it has to be said, the prospects for achieving this, given the added complexities created by the US-led military intervention, are not good.

Box 2 Health indicators in Afghanistan

The indicators for infant and maternal mortality, life expectancy and vaccination coverage, amongst others, place Afghanistan amongst the poorest three nations in the world. It is enormously difficult to obtain accurate statistics on Afghanistan, in the absence of a comprehensive governmental system, but some of the most recent official indicators are as follows:

Infant mortality rate: 16.5 per 1,000 live births (1993)
Source: *State of the World's Children report*, UNICEF, 1996

Under-5 mortality rate: 25.7 per 1,000 live births (1993)
Source: As above

Maternal mortality rate: 1,700 per 100,000 live births (1996) Source: Study by UNICEF/WHO, 1996

Life expectancy at birth: 43.7 years (1993)
Source: UNDP Human Development Report, 1996

It is likely, in the light of the current drought, that if current figures were available, they would depict an even worse situation.

The reform process and the centrality of women's role

Having anchored ourselves in the desperate reality of people's daily struggles to survive, it may be appropriate, at this point, to look at the relationship of women to the economic, political and cultural environment. Because this is inextricably linked to developments since the beginning of this century, it is also necessary to look in greater depth at some of the developments referred to in the introduction.

The historical context

As in any highly conservative rural society, particularly those with strong tribal traditions, there has been a significant adherence to the concept of family and tribal honour and its close association with the conformity of both men and women to societal conventions. Village communities have accorded both protection and control to their members and there have been strong societal pressures to remain within the confines of expected behaviour and life choices. Early marriage has been a normal requirement for girls, with the expectation that they would rear another generation to maintain the existence of the community. With women playing an important role in agricultural production through planting, weeding and livestock care, the concept of employment outside the home has been alien to normal experience. Even amongst the urban populations, in many circles it has been felt to reflect badly on the husband if his wife has been forced, through adverse circumstances, to engage in paid employment. The societal pressures against paid employment for women have, therefore, been extremely strong except within a small urban intellectual elite.

However, within this elite there were strong concerns from the beginning of the twentieth century that Afghan women should be granted the same rights that women were beginning to enjoy in other parts of the world, such as Europe and Turkey. Initially, these concerns were targeted at women within the entourage of the royal family and resulted in some tentative initiatives during the 1920s to increase female access to education. However, these and other measures, which offended the value systems and affected the interests of religious and tribal leaders, led to the overthrow, in 1929, of King Amanullah, who had spearheaded the reform programme.

It was not until the post-Second World War period that education was given any serious priority, whether for girls

or boys. By the 1950s, girls were beginning to enter some of the more traditionally female occupations found in Europe of the same period, such as air hostesses, receptionists, nurses, doctors and administrators. Just as significant was the equal legal status accorded to women by the 1964 Constitution, and the assertion by the then-President Daoud that women had the right to choose how they dressed and whether they would seek paid employment. Daoud was able to impose such reforms because he had learnt from King Amanullah's downfall and built up a strong standing army able to stand up to the religious leaders and the tribes.

The PDPA sought to accelerate the process of reform but alienated the tribal and religious leaders when they used Marxist rhetoric to justify their programme, and by the repressive methods they used both to implement their reforms and to put down the consequent uprisings.

The Soviet invasion brought a halt to any further process of reform and the later leaders of the Soviet-backed government made determined efforts to win over the rural population through a more gradualist approach and an explicit adoption of an Islamic image to counter accusations that the regime was seeking a secular outcome. Although the regime had some limited success in building alliances with some elements of rural society, and in negotiating temporary deals with particular Mujahidin commanders and militia leaders, they were not able to achieve any kind of permanent *rapprochement* with the Mujahidin parties.

The Mujahidin parties and women

The Mujahidin parties, some of which had a strong presence in the refugee camps, were steadfast in their resistance to any further relaxation of traditional custom and practice relating to women, although some took a more radical position than others in seeking to impose additional restrictions on the mobility of women.

The fact that a significant proportion of the female population was living in refugee camps in Pakistan and was therefore surrounded by people outside their village communities led to particular efforts to ensure their seclusion. Thus, rural women who, hitherto, had been able to move freely within their villages, were suddenly confined to tents or family compounds.

This emphasis on female seclusion was reinforced by

the thinking of some of the more radical parties operating in Pakistan, notably those linked to the Indian Deobandi movement, which was anchored in the conservative traditions of the Indian subcontinent, and to the Saudi Wahabis. Thus, in July 1990, four years before the emergence of the Taliban, a *fatwa* was issued by 80 mullahs in Peshawar determining that women should not work and that girls should not attend school. The *fatwa* also stipulated appropriate dress and conduct for women.

However, those educated in the Muslim Brotherhood tradition, such as Jamiat-i-Islami, were less strident on the question of female access to education and employment, and more relaxed in their expectations that, for example, women would always be accompanied by a male relative.

It was the more radical elements who set the tone, however, and made it very difficult for humanitarian agencies to provide for the female population. There was thus a pronounced climate of fear in the refugee camps and amongst humanitarian agencies in Peshawar, particularly during the early 1990s, lest the radicals take the law into their own hands in response to any move to increase female access to education, employment and health care.

The Taliban and women

When the Taliban first took power in Kandahar in October 1994, publicly declaring that women would no longer be allowed to work or receive education and that their access to health care had to be contingent on strict requirements being met, they were building on a pre-existing practice imposed by the more radical of the Mujahidin parties. The most significant difference was that the Mujahidin parties had not, collectively, given expression to such denial of access as a declared policy.

The other major difference was that, whereas the Mujahidin parties had allowed women to remain in their jobs in the urban areas of Afghanistan during their period of rule from 1992 until the Taliban takeover, and had also allowed girls' schools and female health facilities to operate, the Taliban enforced their policy by demanding that women give up their jobs and by closing girls' schools. The Taliban also moved beyond the more radical of the Mujahidin positions by insisting that all women wore the *burqa*. This garment was already in widespread use and had traditionally been used by rural women when leaving their villages for the more public environment of the nearby town. However, hitherto, women had been allowed to choose between the *burqa* and one of the various forms of headcovering which could be used to cover the face, if it was felt necessary, in order to preserve family honour.

The Taliban sought to impose their behavioural and dress codes on the urban population, in particular, and left the rural population to continue as before. It is interesting that the rural population, many of whom have experienced female education in the refugee environment, have expressed a tentative interest in the provision of education for girls within their villages in Afghanistan and engaged in dialogue with the Taliban to this end.

The policies and practice of the Taliban in relation to female access to entitlements has been a major factor in a significant outflow of professionals from Afghanistan, so

that the female population now resident in the urban areas such as Kabul is largely made up of internal migrants from the rural areas of Afghanistan, a significant proportion of whom are non-Pushtun. There is, therefore, some confusion as to whether the relatively punitive behaviour of the Taliban towards women in the cities is a consequence of their perceived urban, and thus decadent, character or of their ethnic identity and, therefore, potential association with opposition elements.

The perpetration of violence against women by the Taliban has tended to take the form of punitive beating rather than sexual violence. Opposition elements have been more frequently criticized by human rights organizations for the latter.

It should be noted here, also, that the Taliban have imposed strict dress and behavioural codes on men. Men were thus required to grow beards and not to shave. Western clothing has been prohibited and head covering, ideally turbans, has become necessary. Men have been instructed to pray only in the mosque and to do so five times per day. They have also been held responsible for the behaviour of their female relatives to a greater extent than before, and fear that their husbands, fathers and brothers will be punished has limited the freedom of women to seek what little employment or education is available to them.

The ethnic dimensions of the Mujahidin government, 1992-6

The assumption was made by the USA and others that the Soviet-backed government would fall almost immediately after the Soviet forces withdrew in February 1989. Determined efforts were therefore made to assist the seven Mujahidin parties registered with the Pakistan government to coalesce around an agreed leadership and to form a government-in-waiting. However, the Soviet-backed government did not fall and the Afghan interim government, as it was called, was never more than a loose coalition of parties with very different agendas. There was also increasing fragmentation amongst the resistance groups at the local level in Afghanistan. However, armed resistance activity against the urban areas continued, manifested in a regular rocketing of Kabul.

During the latter years of the Soviet-backed government, President Najibullah, a Pushtun, sought to build support for his regime through deals with particular political elements and with local commanders and tribal leaders. His alliance with the Uzbek leader, Dostam, was particularly important as Dostam's militia, who were very much feared, were a key component of his military strategy in seeking to withstand the offensives of the Mujahidin against Jalalabad, Khost and Gardez in eastern Afghanistan. Najibullah was also said to have made overtures to the Hazaras and this may have been a factor in the attempted coup by Najibullah's Defence Minister, General Tanai, on 6 March 1990, and the reported involvement of the radical Mujahidin leader, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. There was much speculation that this unexpected alliance between a socialist and a leading Islamist, both of them Pushtun, was brought about by a concern that Najibullah might strengthen the power of non-Pushtuns within the country in his efforts to stay in power.

The announcement, in September 1991, by the US and Soviet governments, that they would halt arms supplies to the various parties to the Afghan conflict with effect from 1 January 1992, was the beginning of the end for the Najibullah government. The announcement by the US government, four months earlier, that it did not intend to provide further funding to the Mujahidin after 1991, was indicative of a view in Washington, perhaps hastened by Hekmatyar's support for Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War, that it was no longer necessary to have an active involvement in Afghanistan now that its objective of weakening the Soviet Union had been achieved.

Over the autumn of 1991, as the decline in resources sent from the Soviet Union sapped the power base of the Najibullah government, intransigence amongst hardliners

within the Mujahidin and the government thwarted UN efforts to agree on a peace plan and what form an alternative government might take.

The collapse of the Soviet-backed government, in April 1992, provided the opportunity for those wielding power in non-Pushtun areas to challenge the previous dominance of Pushtuns within the government of Afghanistan. The prior disintegration of the Soviet Union, which mortally weakened its *protégé* in Kabul, also created a power vacuum in the region into which Pakistan speedily stepped, eager to promote its own objective of building an Islamic bloc through Afghanistan to Central Asia. Pakistan had worked hard to achieve such an outcome since the beginning of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, motivated, in part, by its preoccupation with India's much greater size and superiority, and a consequent aim to achieve 'strategic depth' against India through the creation of such a power bloc. The simultaneous emergence of the Central Asian Republics as separate states thus led Pakistan to woo the new governments in the hope of building strong political and economic links, but it faced powerful competition, in this regard, from Iran and Turkey. The individual Republics also developed their own distinct and very different agendas which added to the complexity of the situation (see pp. 26-7).

During the early months of 1992, deals were struck between particular leaders representing the interests of three of the minority ethnic groups in northern Afghanistan: Ahmed Shah Masoud from the Tajik party, Jamiat-i-Islami; Rashid Dostam with his Uzbek militia; and the Ismaili leader, Sayyid Mansoor. Senior figures within the Soviet-backed government were also in on the act. Thus, when the government collapsed, there was a ready-made coalition of non-Pushtuns in a position to take power and it was this group that initially took control of Kabul.

However, they had to take account of the fact that Pakistan, with support from Saudi Arabia, had been seeking to orchestrate a government-in-waiting from amongst the Mujahidin parties based in Pakistan, of which Jamiat-i-Islami was the only non-Pushtun party.

Thus, when Masoud entered Kabul, he invited the other parties to join with him in forming a government. One of the other Mujahidin leaders, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, sought a greater share of power than was offered to him through the subsequent negotiations. He was particularly opposed to sharing power with Dostam and others who had been involved with the Soviet-backed government.

Hekmatyar opted to use force as a means of achieving his objectives and so set in motion a process that was to reduce

most of southern Kabul to rubble. It also led to periodic flights of the population to other parts of the country, and to Pakistan, in their tens and hundreds of thousands.

The struggle between Hekmatyar and Masoud was a major element in the conflict that affected Kabul between 1992 and 1996, only brought to an end by a power-sharing agreement in May 1996. However, another important element was a simultaneous and often prolonged armed engagement between the Shi'a party, Hisb-e-Wahdat, and the Saudi-backed Ittihad-i-Islami. Like the other non-Pushtun parties, Hisb-e-Wahdat had sought to seize the opportunity of the collapse of the Soviet-backed government, in its case, in order to strengthen the position of the Shi'a Hazaras within the government and so reverse their traditional marginalization. To this end, it had occupied much of western Kabul at the same time as Masoud was entering the capital from the north. Ittihad-i-Islami forces had taken positions in adjacent areas and may have shared the prejudices of their Saudi backers against the Shi'a code and against the Iranian model of radical Islam that Hisb-e-Wahdat espoused. Heavy fighting broke out between the two parties almost immediately after the fall of the Soviet-backed government. This became particularly serious when,

at the beginning of 1993, Hekmatyar joined in on the side of Hisb-e-Wahdat. This prompted Masoud to line up with Ittihad-i-Islami and to launch a major attack on the Afshar neighbourhood of western Kabul held by Hisb-e-Wahdat. Because of the large number of civilians killed, this came to be known as the Afshar massacre.

Thus Masoud, who might have opted to support another non-Pushtun group, Hisb-e-Wahdat, in order to reduce Pushtun dominance, was guilty, through the Afshar massacre, of an atrocity against this group, in alliance with the most radical and anti-Shi'a of the Pushtun Mujahidin groups, albeit in opposition to another radical Pushtun group, Hisb-e-Islami (Hekmatyar).

Masoud, and his fellow member of Jamiat, Burhanuddin Rabbani, who had taken on the position of President under the agreed power-sharing arrangements, also failed to respect the alliance with the two other non-Pushtun leaders, Dostam and Sayyid Mansoor, who had been instrumental in the capture of Kabul, and they maintained a cool distance from them. This outraged Dostam, who had effective control of north-central Afghanistan, centred on Mazar-i-Sharif, and sought a federal system of government with a high level of regional autonomy. Such an arrangement may

Box 3 Political parties

The Mujahidin

The Mujahidin parties which emerged during the period of Soviet occupation and which were accorded recognition by Pakistan and the USA, as a basis for channelling resources to the resistance movement, can be divided into two groups: the Islamist parties, with their origins in the intellectual movements of the 1970s and espousing political ideologies and structures based on various reinterpretations of Islam; and, with much less power, what were known as the traditionalist parties, which had strong roots in Pushtun tribal society. In addition, various parties emerged in the Shi'a Hazarajat, which eventually coalesced into a single party, Hisb-e-Wahdat.

The Islamist parties

1. Jamiat-i-Islami, which was set up in 1972, was seen as distinct from the rest, having a Tajik base and also being more active in engaging in resistance activity within Afghanistan. Its leader, Burhanuddin Rabbani, advocated that efforts to establish a political movement based on Islam should be undertaken gradually and should be built on the societal structures existing in Afghanistan.
2. Hisb-e-Wahdat, the Shi'a Hazara party, was the other major non-Pushtun party and it also had a strong presence within the country. This party, which had been established in July 1990 as a result of an initiative of the Iranian government to bring all the Hazara Mujahidin parties under one umbrella, tended to favour the model adopted in Iran, with its strong emphasis on the creation of new organizational structures, aimed at consolidation of the Islamic state, as distinct from a strengthening of traditional bodies.
3. and 4. Hisb-e-Islami (Hekmatyar) and Hisb-e-Islami (Khalis) emerged from a single entity and tended to be defined, after their split, by their respective leaders, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Yousif Khalis. Khalis was the less radical of the two and felt that it was important to anchor the movement in the structures and

traditions of the affiliated tribes. Hekmatyar, by contrast, wished to establish a movement based on a pyramidal cell structure and to eradicate traditional beliefs and structures, and replace them by a politicized Islam. Both parties were Pushtun. Hisb-e-Islami (Hekmatyar) was widely reported to have been given substantial resources from the USA, through Pakistan's intelligence services, ISI, but may have retained a significant proportion of these for the power struggle which followed the departure of Soviet forces in February 1989.

5. Ittihad-i-Islami, headed by Abdul Rasoul Sayyaf, was Saudi backed and was particularly rigid in its radicalism. This party was also Pushtun.

The traditionalist parties

1. Harakat-i-Islami, led by Nabi Mohammadi, sought to create a network of local structures in support of the thinking of the traditional religious leadership and can be seen as having strong links with the Taliban.
 2. Mahaz-i-Mihi-i-Islami (NIFA) was based on the personal power base of the Sufi religious leader, Pir Gailani, and was identified as favouring a return of the former king, Zahir Shah.
 3. The Afghan National Liberation Front, headed by Sibghatullah Mujadidi. The Mujadidi family had headed one of the branches of the Sufi Naqshbandi order in southern Afghanistan and had links with the former ruling establishment.
- All three of the traditionalist parties were Pushtun.

Other key players

1. Rashid Dostam, the Uzbek leader of a militia which fought in support of the Soviet-backed government against the Mujahidin and subsequently sought a share of the government which emerged in April 1992.
2. Sayyid Mansoor, the Ismaili leader, based in Baghlan Province, who fought consistently alongside Dostam's militia.

also have suited the Tajik commander, Ismail Khan who, although linked to Jamiat-i-Islami, operated his own fiefdom in western Afghanistan.

Dostam's anger at his continuing exclusion from the formal power-sharing arrangements in Kabul, in which the Pakistan government played a continuing role, finally resulted in him joining forces with Hekmatyar, for a brief period, to carry out a major rocketing and bombing onslaught on Kabul over several days at the beginning of January 1994. This was of nightmarish proportions and led the civilian population to flee in panic in their hundreds of thousands, many losing their children in the flight. Huge camps had to be set up near Jalalabad to cope with the mass influx and people did not return on any scale until the summer of 1995.

It was after several more months of chronic instability that the Taliban made their appearance in Kandahar in October 1994, and it was popular disappointment at the failure of the Mujahidin parties to bring peace and stability to the country that was the major factor in their early successes in capturing much of the south.

The events of the following two years in Kabul, leading up to the Taliban capture of the city in September 1996, are covered in the timeline that follows. However, it is important to note that the expulsion of Hekmatyar from Charasyab by the Taliban in February 1995, and the subsequent eviction of the Taliban from the base by Masoud, led to seven months of political and military stability in Kabul. The willingness of Hekmatyar to finally put his differences with Masoud to one side, in the face of a common enemy, and join the government in May 1996 is also noteworthy.

The four years of conflict in Kabul from 1992 to 1996 had a devastating impact on the population. The city was continually rocketed over long periods and there were particular episodes, as noted above, when rockets rained on to the city. The ongoing fighting also forced people to be continually on the move, as first one district and then another became too dangerous. Vast areas of southern Kabul came to resemble a landscape in the aftermath of a nuclear attack.

Box 4 Timeline, 1994–6

October 1994: Taliban movement emerges as new force in Afghanistan when they take military action in support of a Pakistani trade convoy and subsequently capture Kandahar.

14 February 1995: Taliban oust Hekmatyar from his base at Charasyab to the south of Kabul.

March 1995: Taliban briefly capture western Kabul and take Hisb-e-Wahdat leader prisoner. He dies a few days later in mysterious circumstances. Jamiat forces push the Taliban out of western Kabul and Charasyab, thus taking Kabul out of rocket range for the first time since April 1992.

5 September 1995: The Taliban peacefully enter Herat. This follows an offensive by Ismail Khan's forces from 23 August in which they had advanced as far as Girishk, to the west of Kandahar, stating that they were intending to attack the city. The Taliban were able to push them back and were assisted in taking Shindand by bombing raids undertaken by Dostam against Rabbani's principal airbase at Bagram, to the north of Kabul, in which many of his planes were damaged and his pilots injured. Dostam also bombed Shindand airbase. Dostam and the Taliban were reported to have been meeting in Quetta for some months to discuss joint action against Rabbani. Having helped the Taliban take Herat, Dostam then proceeds to take over Badghis where his forces had been locked in conflict with Ismail Khan for the previous two years.

10 October 1995: The Taliban recover Charasyab and proceed to rocket and bomb Kabul over the following months.

25 May 1996: Rabbani and Hekmatyar agree on power-sharing arrangement in which Hekmatyar again takes on the position of Prime Minister and, this time, he is able to operate from the capital.

11 September 1996: Taliban capture Jalalabad.

26 September 1996: Taliban take Kabul.

The Taliban advance and the impact on minorities

The Taliban in Kandahar

The Taliban had taken Kandahar with enormous ease in November 1994. The population had experienced over two years of instability, bordering on anarchy, as the various commanders fought out their turf battles on the streets of the city. Even today, there is hardly a building without the marks of war and many have disintegrated into an amorphous mass of mud. Further, large areas of the city were intensively mined and have required the painstaking efforts of de-miners to embark on the long clearance process.

When the Taliban first appeared as a military force, they were viewed by the Pushtun population in the south almost as a supernatural phenomenon, with their turbans and the long flowing robes associated with the religious leadership. They were thus perceived as consistent with the historical tradition whereby religious leaders would bring the Pushtun tribes together in times of national crisis. Their call to the population to surrender their arms and bring them to a central place in the city was readily acceded to and this emphasis on disarmament has remained an integral part of their programme as they have moved forward in their conquest of the country. However, disarmament of their own forces has never been stated as a goal.

The edicts which the Taliban immediately issued prohibiting female employment and education also met with little or no resistance. All public services had effectively collapsed and there were few, if any, opportunities for women to work or girls to be educated. It also proved possible for humanitarian agencies to negotiate a relaxation of restrictions imposed on female access to health care and on female employment, so that women could travel to health facilities and could also be employed as health care workers. Access was, therefore, better at this stage than in more recent years.

Over the following months, the Taliban were able to capture much of southeastern Afghanistan, essentially the Pushtun heartland, with people willingly giving up their arms and also volunteering to fight.

The Taliban in Herat

The Taliban capture of the previously peaceful and multi-ethnic Herat in September 1995, and their rocketing of Kabul from October 1995 onwards, dashed any faint hopes that they might halt their offensive once they had brought order to the Pushtun south, and that

they might be willing to agree on some form of *modus vivendi* with the other parties. They thus became yet another Pushtun group seeing dominance over other ethnic groups.

The Taliban did not find the welcome in Herat that they had enjoyed in the Pushtun south. The Persian-speaking multi-ethnic population had benefited from three years of stable government under Ismail Khan, albeit on the basis of increasing restrictions over, for example, the playing of music, as a result of pressures from the local religious leadership. With the support of humanitarian agencies, a network of schools had been established, employing several thousand women teachers and educating both girls and boys. The city also had a strong intellectual and cultural tradition and, therefore, had a relatively well-educated population. When the Taliban introduced their restrictions on female education and employment, all the girls' schools were closed and the loss of female teachers made it difficult for many boys' schools to function. Humanitarian agencies argued strongly against this but failed in their efforts.

The restrictions imposed on female employment did not, however, extend to health care roles, and the progress achieved through negotiations in Kandahar also bore fruit in Herat. There were, nonetheless, practical constraints on women's access to health care. The Taliban were particularly strict on the imposition of dress codes and women who did not conform found themselves the objects of summary punitive action. Women therefore became very nervous about going out and there was clear evidence of a decline in attendance at health care facilities as a result.

The Taliban, in their capture of Herat, again placed a strong emphasis on disarmament and resorted to house-to-house searches in their efforts to gather up arms. These demonstrated that the Taliban movement has not had effective control over its forces, and undue levels of force have often been used in the disarmament process.

The Taliban also demonstrated their narrow interpretation of the Islamic injunction against the portrayal of the human or animal form. They imposed upon Herat the puritanism with regard to music, singing and dancing that had been a feature of the Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia. Herat suffered particularly because of its strong cultural inheritance and liberal traditions. The statue of a horse in the centre of town was decapitated. A huge mural that a local artist had worked on for years in the Governor's palace was whitewashed over. Musicians had their instruments forcibly broken. People could no longer engage singers or musicians for weddings. Taliban forces were on the constant look-out for music cassettes.

This destruction of their cultural identity was felt very

deeply by the population and the city may be said to remain in mourning for what it has lost. This same mourning is now experienced by Afghans across the world for the Buddhist statues destroyed in Bamiyan and elsewhere in February and March 2001.

There was also a linguistic barrier when the Taliban took Herat. The Taliban placed their own nominees from Kandahar in the senior positions in the government ministries, the municipality and the hospitals. These officials had to communicate with their subordinates through interpreters. This replacement of multi-ethnic bureaucrats by Pushtun nominees, most of whom had no appropriate expertise or experience, reinforced the sense that the Taliban represented an army of occupation. The population opted to acquiesce in their rule, however, reluctant to return to fighting after several years of peace.

The Taliban capture of Herat resulted in the exodus of thousands of professionals to Iran. Slowly, some have returned to invest in the local economy but the city has lost much of its former intellectual and artistic character.

After their capture of Herat, the Taliban forces moved northeast into Badghis but, in the east of the province, found themselves face to face with the forces of the Uzbek leader, Rashid Dostam. Taliban and Uzbek forces fought a long battle around Ghormach and Murghab for almost two years before the Taliban finally broke through, aided by a betrayal within the ranks of the opposition.

The latter part of 1995 and the early part of 1996 were therefore characterized by a prolonged stand-off between the Taliban and opposition forces on two major fronts: Kabul and Badghis. The first breakthrough came suddenly, in September 1996, when the Taliban were able to capture Jalalabad and then Kabul. Both cities fell with only minimal fighting. In both cases, the opposition forces opted to withdraw.

The Taliban in Kabul

The hopes of the international community that the Taliban might moderate their policies if they took on the responsibilities of national government were undermined by immediate indications that the Taliban were embarking on a moral campaign to cleanse Kabul society of its presumed decadence. The establishment of the religious police, the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, resulted in even greater efforts to impose behavioural and dress codes on the population than had been manifested in Herat.

With the arrival of the Taliban, intellectuals and professionals responded to the consequent loss of employment for women, the closure of girls' schools, the climate of insecurity and long delays in the payment of government salaries by seeking refuge in Pakistan. A significant part of this population, who have been living since then at a particular camp, Nasir Bagh, were given notice to leave by the end of June 2001. The Pakistan government and UNHCR subsequently embarked on a screening process to identify those in this camp who could be regarded as being at risk if returned to Afghanistan.

The population that remained in Kabul was largely internally displaced people from the rural areas, many of

whom were Tajiks from the Shomali valley and the Panjshir. With the Shomali valley a contested area, the Taliban saw the Tajik population as potential sympathizers with the opposition forces and this was an additional factor in the often undue use of force by Taliban forces against the Kabul population, and in the arrest and imprisonment of many Tajiks.

The powerful role of the religious police also led to further restrictions being placed on female access to health care: women could only attend health care facilities if accompanied by a male relative, and had to be segregated from men in health care establishments. The religious police also kept a watchful eye on any apparent relaxations of the restrictions on female employment. When humanitarian agencies negotiated with the Ministry of Public Health for exemptions to be made for specific posts of particular importance to the priority needs of the female population, the religious police often intervened to require a reversal of the process. There has thus been a pattern of efforts by humanitarian agencies to employ women for specific priority functions, and of setbacks in the face of opposition by the religious police and the Ministry of Justice.

The struggle for Mazar-i-Sharif

In December 1996, the Taliban were able to capture and hold on to the entire Shomali valley. They were again blocked at the Salang Pass, however, by a combination of Masoud's and Dostam's forces. The capture of the Shomali valley resulted in the exodus of much of its population. Around 200,000 people, primarily Tajiks, sought refuge in Kabul; others travelled north to Mazar-i-Sharif. The following July, Masoud's forces were able to recapture the valley as far as the previous front line to the south of Bagram airbase, 50 km north of Kabul. This permitted some of the displaced population to return to work on their land while other members of the family remained in Kabul to benefit from the assistance provided by humanitarian agencies.

This successful military action by Masoud was the consequence of a process which had started a couple of months earlier when the Taliban had been able to break through the front line in eastern Badghis after striking a deal with an Uzbek commander from Faryab, Abdul Malik. Malik had opted to abandon his previous allegiance to Dostam and the Taliban were thus able to oust Dostam from his base at Shiberghan and to enter Mazar-i-Sharif on 25 May 1997. When they attempted to disarm the population, however, they met with fierce resistance from the Hazara population of the city for which they were ill-prepared. Large numbers were killed or captured. The Taliban remain deeply scarred to this day by subsequent developments in which around 2,000 Taliban prisoners were murdered by Abdul Malik's forces and buried in mass graves or thrown down wells.

While one group of Taliban forces was facing defeat in Mazar, another was moving south towards the Salang Pass from Kunduz, a Pushtun enclave in which they had local support. They were able to cross the Pass without resistance through the apparent defection of an opposition

commander, only to find themselves suddenly cut off from the north and vulnerable to attack by Masoud's forces. It was at this point that Masoud took the opportunity to recapture the northern part of the Shomali valley, enabling some harvesting and planting to take place. The conflict over possession of this valley has nonetheless had an inevitable impact on the availability of food for the capital and the surrounding region, as it has always been one of the most fertile and productive areas of Afghanistan.

Although the Taliban were defeated in Mazar, so was Dostam, and Abdul Malik was not able to draw on Dostam's previous support base and so restore stability to the northern region. Hisb-e-Wahdat forces took the opportunity created by disarray in the Uzbek camp to strengthen their own position in Mazar and the north central area of Afghanistan. The result was chronic small-scale conflict over much of the north. The simultaneous ongoing struggle between different factions of Hisb-e-Wahdat in central Afghanistan over the following year, left Masoud as the only opposition military leader with anything like a firm hold on the territory under his control. Opposition forces were able to prevent a further Taliban attempt to capture Mazar in September 1997. The instability in the north over this period made it particularly difficult for humanitarian agencies to operate in Mazar-i-Sharif and surrounding areas, and they faced many setbacks to their efforts to maintain and establish programmes.

The Taliban remained determined to capture Mazar and, benefiting from the effective collapse of the opposition, made a successful advance on the city in early August 1998. On this occasion, they were better prepared and they were also fired by the desire for revenge against those who had been responsible for the defeat of May 1997 and the massacre of their men. Although it was the Uzbek leader, Abdul Malik, who had perpetrated the massacres of Taliban prisoners, the Taliban opted to target Hazaras, who had staged the initial uprising. It has been difficult to establish with any degree of accuracy what happened in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban entry into Mazar, particularly as the Taliban would not allow any journalists into the city, but there is substantial credible evidence of human rights violations occurring on a mass scale. Amnesty International, reporting in September 1998, stated that, according to testimonies from eyewitnesses and surviving members of the victims' families, the Taliban had 'deliberately and systematically killed thousands of ethnic Hazara civilians during the first three days following their military takeover of Mazar-e-Sharif on 8 August 1998'. Amnesty International reported that many civilians were killed, either in their homes or in the street, during house-to-house searches. It expressed its concern that some had been killed by having their throats slit. It noted that women, children and the elderly were also shot attempting to flee.

Human Rights Watch, reporting in November 1998, spoke of a 'killing frenzy' over the first day after the Taliban took Mazar, followed by a week or so of house-to-house searches in which they were looking for men and teenage boys from the Hazara, Tajik and Uzbek communities. The ethno-religious motivation behind some of the violations was further evidenced, according to Human Rights Watch, in public pronouncements by the Taliban-

installed Governor, who threatened that Hazaras who remained would be killed if they did not convert to Sunni Islam. Human Rights Watch disputed the assertion by the Taliban that the killings were the actions of rogue elements, stating that this was not borne out by the systematic way in which the house-to-house searches were conducted. In response to subsequent expressions of concern by the international community, the Taliban responded with denials. At the same time, they made it clear that they felt unfairly criticized when, in their view, so little attention had been given to the previous massacre of their own men.

However, the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, appeared to accept that his forces had gone beyond the bounds of acceptable behaviour, when, in response to Amnesty International's expressed fears for the population of Bamyan, he stated that he had ordered his soldiers to treat civilians and soldiers properly. This would suggest that there were serious weaknesses in the imposition of appropriate discipline by the chain of command. There are conflicting reports as to how the Taliban behaved when they took Bamyan the following month and over the subsequent period of occupation, during which Hisb-e-Wahdat forces made a successful attempt to recapture the town on 21 April 1999, only to lose it again on 9 May. Both sides would appear to have abused their power, resulting in civilian deaths as each sought to engage in revenge killings. As a result, Bamyan has suffered a very significant level of destruction and all but a very small proportion of its population has been displaced.

Further campaigns

The Taliban were similarly reported to have destroyed many homes when they undertook a further major offensive against Masoud's forces in the Shomali valley in August 1999. This resulted in the displacement of an estimated 65,000 people to the Panjshir valley, a displacement which, to some degree, continues.

The Taliban again went on the offensive in July and August 2000, when they took key positions from Masoud's forces to the south of Taloqan in northeast Afghanistan. Taloqan, a key commercial centre for the Tajik population, was captured on 5 September and there has been ongoing conflict since. This offensive has resulted in the displacement of an estimated 250,000 people. There were again reports of the destruction of civilian homes and of agricultural infrastructure by Taliban forces.

On 30 December 2000, Hisb-e-Wahdat forces were able to seize Yakawlang, in the Hazarajat, from the Taliban, and were reported to have been responsible for summary executions. When the Taliban recaptured it on 9 January 2001, their commander, according to reports from Human Rights Watch and other sources, ordered revenge attacks to be carried out on the civilian population. Human Rights Watch stated that between 170 and 300 people were killed, most summarily executed, including some members of humanitarian organizations. Human Rights Watch reported that on at least two occasions the Taliban killed delegations of Hazara elders who had attempted to intercede with them. Hisb-e-Wahdat retook

Yakawlang on 22 January and also took Bamyan on 13 February, only to lose it on 17 February. The Taliban retook Yakawlang on 8 June 2001 and put it to fire before withdrawing. Some 5,000 buildings were reported burnt, mostly houses but including shops, a clinic and several mosques. Further fighting in the northeast and west of the country, particularly around Ghor, has again resulted in allegations that the Taliban have burned civilian homes as a collective punishment for opposition offensives.

In response to the alleged atrocities at Yakawlang, and an earlier alleged Taliban massacre at Robatak Pass in May 2000 of Hazara civilians, some of whom had been tortured first, human rights organizations called for an investigation so that those responsible could be held to account. The Taliban denied the reports, but banned journalists from visiting Yakawlang.

In addition to extrajudicial executions and other collective punishments against civilians, detention without charge has been routinely practised by the Taliban. Most of those detained were reported to be from ethnic minorities, including Hazaras, Tajiks and Uzbeks, many of whom were tortured.

In spite of initial statements that they aimed to be multi-ethnic in their composition, the Taliban have remained a predominantly Pushtun movement. There has even been a tendency for Kandahari Pushtuns to predominate within the Taliban power structure at the expense of other Pushtuns such as the Ghilzais, a pattern that existed under Abdur-Rahman at the end of the nineteenth century. The leadership structure has included, at various points in time, a few individuals from minority ethnic groups but the Taliban now clearly regard non-Pushtuns with suspicion, as potential opposition sympathizers. There is also clear intolerance towards the practice of Shi'a Islam and towards, for example, popular adherence to the celebration of the festival of Nawruz, or new year, which has pre-Islamic origins.

The assassination of Ahmed Shah Masoud in early September 2001 might have led to a major offensive by the Taliban to capture the remaining area of opposition control in the northeast. However, the attacks on the USA of 11 September, and the decision by Pakistan to cooperate with the USA in support of efforts to secure the handover of the principal suspect, Osama bin Laden, by military means, will have diverted the thinking of military strategists in Kandahar and Pakistan to more pressing concerns. At the time of writing, it remains an open question whether the Taliban or elements within them will have a continuing role in wielding power in Afghanistan.

Islam and ethnicity

The notion that the Taliban are representative of the Muslim world is erroneous. As should already be evident from what has been written above in this Report, there is a complex relationship in Afghanistan between Islam and ethnicity, including the role of traditional tribal structures and practices. Discrimination against Hazaras, for instance, has both an ethnic and religious aspect. Many Taliban practices could be seen as deriving from Pushtunwali rather than Islam, and it should be stressed that the Taliban interpretation of Islam is in any case regarded as unusually radical within the Muslim world. The existence of a large number of non-Afghan fighters in the country, many of them Arabs or Pakistanis (including those linked to Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda organization) further complicates the picture.

However, Islam has represented an important unifying element in the ethnic mosaic of Afghanistan, albeit to the exclusion of the Shi'a, Hindu and Sikh populations, and has been as much a determining factor in historical developments in Afghanistan as ethnicity. Historically, charismatic mullahs or *ulema* would take on a leadership role, bringing tribal elements together to confront a common enemy such as the British in India or governments that were found to be unacceptable. Such leaders would preach reform aimed at the achievement of greater purity in the observance of Islam, or issue *fatwas* (legal rulings) that called for a *jihad* or established or denied the legitimacy of a ruler.

The Taliban – influences and beliefs

It is, perhaps, with such charismatic mullahs that we can most easily associate the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar. The Taliban have their origins in the Islamic *madrasahs* of Pakistan. A significant proportion of the leadership received their training at a particular *madrasah* at Akora Khattack near Peshawar run by Sami ul-Haq, a leader of the radical Pakistani party, Jamiat al-Ulema al-Islami. Many of these *madrasahs* have provided volunteers to fight in the Kashmir conflict, many of whom have been given military training in Afghanistan.

The Taliban creed can be seen to draw on the puritanical austerity of the political and religious leadership within the refugee camps, together with the belief system of the Indian Deobandi movement, which advocated female seclusion, and of the Wahabbi doctrine, with its strong focus on behavioural and dress codes and its use of the religious police to enforce these. There are also strong links with Jamiat-al-Ulema al-Islami and with the wider network of radical parties in Pakistan, with the result that, although the Taliban leadership is Afghan,

many of their advisers and fighting forces are Pakistani. Within Afghanistan, one can identify historical links with the traditionalist Mujahidin party, Harakat-i-Islami, and with Hisb-e-Islami (Khalis). The vast majority of the Taliban are Pushtun in their ethnic origin and the determination to ensure that women remain secluded from contact with strangers is consistent with the stress on tribal honour, which is a central element of the tribal code, Pushtunwali.

The circumstances of their actual emergence – they appeared to come out of nowhere when, in October 1994, they came to the rescue of a Pakistani trade convoy and subsequently captured Kandahar – have been subject to much speculation. One theory is that, as a group of former students of Akora Khattack resident in Kandahar, they took exception to the immoral behaviour of certain local commanders and took the law into their own hands. This spontaneous action was seen as an opportunity by various elements within Pakistan to take advantage of popular disaffection with the insecurity which had prevailed in Kandahar and much of southern Afghanistan, and use the Taliban to bring at least some order to the country. An important motive, in this regard, was to open up the trade route with the relatively new Central Asian Republics, and the Taliban were used to free the captured Pakistan trade convoy from a group of local commanders who objected to their transit through Afghanistan without authority. It is also likely that Pakistan, disillusioned with Hekmatyar after 1992, saw, in the emerging Taliban movement, another instrument to establish a compliant Pushtun regime in Kabul.

The Taliban were clear in stating their objectives from the very outset: the complete conquest of Afghanistan, a disarming of the population and the creation of a state based on Shari'a law. Their public statements indicated a strong focus on behavioural and dress codes, with a pronounced emphasis on female seclusion, together with a highly conservative approach to the visual arts and music. Unlike Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, they came without a complex blueprint as to how they were going to structure the state but worked through a network of local governors whom they changed reasonably frequently in order to avoid them building up individual power bases. There was also no written ideology.

The attention given to public welfare programmes in some other radical Islamic movements, such as those of the Muslim Brotherhood, Qadhafi's Libya or the Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran, was notably absent. There has been virtually no investment in health care, education, water supply, sanitation or poverty eradication. The Taliban claimed that they could not give attention to such programmes until they completed their conquest of the country, but their willingness to continue with their military objectives in the face of the worst drought for 30 years over 2000 and 2001, with a significant proportion of the population living

at the very margins of survival and hundreds of thousands displaced by fighting, clearly indicates that public welfare is an extremely low priority.

The Taliban creed has been remarkably consistent. It can be described as akin to a folk religion, particularly given the absence of any written document encapsulating their thinking. However, the behavioural and dress codes espoused are more extreme than the practice in the villages of Afghanistan. It can also be seen as a societal response to the chronic insecurity and disruption of the years of conflict dating from the PDPA coup of April 1978, and this would seem to be confirmed by the strong popular backing for the Taliban in the southern Pushtun provinces over the initial months after their emergence. It is also reasonable to take the view that the Taliban movement represented an attempt to return Afghanistan to the 1930s, after the religious and traditional leaders had risen up against the incipient reform movement of King Amanullah but before the development of liberalism and socialism, which took hold from the 1950s onwards. It is equally possible to regard it as a response to the disruption that the conflict has engendered, creating a possible fear within the Taliban that Afghan societal structures and traditions might have been weakened and might thus be vulnerable to Western cultural influences, which are regarded as secular and decadent. Their movement may thus be seen as an attempt to create a cocoon around Afghanistan, to maintain the integrity of those aspects of Afghan cultural traditions that they value. The focus on female seclusion can be seen very much in this light, so that women are regarded as crucial to the maintenance of these cultural traditions through their role in bringing up the next generation of Muslims. The fear is that, if women have contact with ideas from the outside world through access to paid employment or through education, they will abandon Islam or at least become more liberal, and so will not be able to fulfil their role of passing down the valued traditions to the next generation. Alternatively, the Taliban may view women as an important mechanism for inculcating their particular visions into children at a receptive age.

There would also appear to be an underlying Pushtun agenda, which has been underscored by the rumoured presence of former pilots from the Soviet period flying aircraft in support of Taliban military activity, and by strong support for the Taliban from some Pushtuns in the West. It should be stated here that there have been many Afghans in the diaspora who have seen the Taliban as preferable to the Mujahidin because of the relative stability they have brought to the areas under their control. However, some of their more recent actions, notably the destruction of the Buddhist statues in Bamiyan in February 2001 have eroded this external support base.

It should be stressed that the Taliban are not monolithic and that there exists a spectrum from relative moderates to hardliners within the movement, with consequent differences in policy and practice from one locality to another and from one period to another. External influences such as hostile acts by the West (air strikes and sanctions) and highly critical international media coverage can be seen to have strengthened the hardliners and to have radicalized the political environment further.

It is difficult to be clear as to whether the periodic

atrocities conducted by Pushtuns, including the Taliban, against the Hazaras, are a consequence of the long-standing intolerance felt by many Sunni Afghans towards this Shi'a ethnic and religious group. Clearly, the active opposition of the Hazaras to the Taliban conquests of Mazar and the Hazarajat has been a factor in the strength of the Taliban reaction when they retook these areas. It is, nonetheless, possible that the anti-Shi'a disposition of the Taliban and of some of the volunteers from other parts of the Islamic world fighting with the Taliban has been an important element in the action taken against Hazaras and other Shia's.

The international dimension

Afghanistan and its neighbours

Pakistan and the Mujahidin

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Pakistan saw an opportunity to fill the power vacuum. Building on its support for the Mujahidin resistance movement during the period of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Pakistan sought more actively to pursue its objective of creating an Islamic bloc from Pakistan through Afghanistan to Central Asia, in order to establish strategic depth against India. Pakistan therefore set out to place a sympathetic regime in Kabul and to woo the Central Asian Republics.

We can see the active involvement of Pakistan in the efforts of the Mujahidin parties to form a government from 1992 to 1996 in this light. We can similarly view the complex relationship between the Pakistan government and the Taliban through this prism. In both cases, Pakistan has found itself out of its depth and has suffered the consequences of increased Islamic radicalism within its own borders. Thus, during the early 1990s, radical elements linked to the Mujahidin were thought to be responsible for the spate of assassinations, in Peshawar, of leading Afghan intellectuals. More recently, the Taliban movement has served as a source of inspiration for radical elements in Pakistan and given them the strength to challenge the central government by virtue of the street power they have been able to foster. Coming on top of this Talibanization process, the decision by Pakistan's leader, General Musharraf, to support US intervention in Afghanistan has created a political crisis within Pakistan.

Pakistan has also been unsuccessful in establishing any meaningful relationship with the Central Asian Republics. These have found the break from Moscow to be a difficult one, with the economies very much interlinked and the Russian government being reluctant to let go of the reins. The emergence of the Taliban, their successful conquest of much of Afghanistan and their alleged role in permitting paramilitary training camps to operate within the areas under their control have given Russia strong grounds for seeking to re-establish a military presence along the northern Afghan border.

Tajikistan

Tajikistan has yielded to this pressure, allowing a sizeable contingent of Russian troops to police the border, both to withstand any possible incursions by Taliban forces and to curb the smuggling of opium and heroin into

Tajikistan. In addition, both Russia and Tajikistan are providing logistical support to the opposition forces through the use of the airbase at Kulyab in southern Tajikistan and both Rabbani and Masoud had spent much of their time in Tajikistan prior to Masoud's assassination.

The Tajikistan government is particularly nervous of any support that the Taliban might give to Islamic radicals within its own borders, having emerged in May 1997 from a civil war in which the remnants of the former Soviet regime were pitted against Islamic rebels from the mountains of Gorno-Badakshan. The power-sharing arrangement that was finally agreed between the two sides is extremely fragile and the government has looked to another Islamic government, in Iran, to help it identify a structured way forward rather than find itself vulnerable to any developments that the Taliban might set in train. Iran has therefore very much established itself as the favoured neighbour for Tajikistan outside the CIS, helped by the common use of Persian, an affinity which also extends to the Tajik element in the Afghan opposition. It is interesting, nonetheless, that the Tajik government, in response to the flight of 10,000 Afghan Tajiks to islands on the Amu Darya on the border with Afghanistan in September 2000, has refused to allow any refugees to enter Tajikistan. Thus, in spite of their common Tajik lineage, Tajikistan has been influenced by its fear that a refugee presence, with fighters among them, might have a destabilizing effect on the country.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan is wary both of Tajikistan, whose Islamic movement it fears, and of Russia. Initially, the Uzbek government was willing to join in the collective security arrangements established by some members of the CIS after the collapse of the Soviet Union but, more recently, particularly with the advent of President Putin, it had asserted its wish to maintain some distance from Moscow and to reach some kind of accommodation with the Taliban. Prior to the events of 11 September 2001, it had even spoken of reopening the border with Afghanistan, which was firmly sealed after the Taliban took Mazar in August 1998. The Uzbek government nonetheless remains preoccupied with Islamic radicalism, not least because of the long-standing efforts of various Islamic parties, with encouragement from Saudi Arabia, to build a strong movement in the Ferghana valley, which straddles Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Armed attacks by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in the summer of 2000 served to intensify the Uzbek government's concerns. Uzbekistan, like Tajikistan, has been very resistant to any possible influx of Afghans as refugees. This underlying concern may have been a key factor in its agreement to the

use of its territory in support of the US-led military action against Afghanistan that commenced in October 2001.

Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

Turkmenistan has opted to remain even more aloof from Russia, refusing to join any collective security arrangements from the date of the Soviet Union's collapse, and even establishing a close relationship with the Taliban. This closeness has largely been dictated by Turkmenistan's interest in the opening of new routes to the south through which to transport Turkoman gas and oil and so reduce its dependence on Russia as its primary market, with the highly disadvantageous terms involved. The construction of a pipeline across Afghanistan was first mooted over 1995–6 by the chair of an Argentinian oil company, Bidas. Having signed a contract with the Turkoman government for the exploitation of particular gas fields, he then sought to persuade the Taliban. However, a US company, UNOCAL, soon appeared on the scene and the Taliban found themselves negotiating with both companies. Negotiations were already far advanced when the Taliban took Kabul in September 1996 and both UNOCAL and the US government made clear their support for this development, and their hope that this would produce the necessary stability to further the pipeline project. However, the subsequent conquests of the Taliban and the concerns these raised amongst human rights organizations, combined with a growing lobby in the USA against the gender policies of the Taliban, resulted in a pronounced shift within US policy away from any *rapprochement* with the Taliban. Finally, following the bombings of the US embassies in East Africa and the US air strikes on Afghanistan of August 1998, UNOCAL found its position untenable and, in December, announced its withdrawal from the consortium of agencies pursuing the pipeline proposal. This has left Turkmenistan in a situation in which there is insufficient foreign capital for any pipeline across Afghanistan and, although both it and Pakistan continue to express their hope that the pipeline project might be revived, Turkmenistan is now looking to Iran as an alternative route for the export of its gas. The Turkoman government has also agreed to supply gas to northern Afghanistan through a deal arranged with the Taliban.

The more northern Central Asian states, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have remained within the Russian sphere of influence, sharing its view that the threat from Islamic radicalism is a serious one. They have also viewed with alarm the growing use of the CIS as a route for opium and heroin emanating from Afghanistan, as Iran strengthens its border defences against drugs smugglers and so inhibits the flow of narcotics through the more traditional route of Iran and Turkey to Europe. However, Kyrgyzstan more recently softened its position somewhat with regard to the Taliban, taking a similar view to that of Uzbekistan.

Iran

Iran has passed through several stages in its relationship with Afghanistan. During the period prior to the Soviet invasion and the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Afghanistan tended to be regarded as a source of cheap labour, and not

much more. Afghans were viewed as relatively ill-educated and thus undervalued. The Soviet invasion represented both a threat to Iran's security and an opportunity to strengthen the position of the Shi'a element amongst the Afghan population. Iran therefore opted to provide support to the various resistance parties operating in the Hazarajat, particularly those that were ideologically sympathetic to the goals of the Iranian revolution. Finally, in 1990, as noted above, it successfully encouraged these to coalesce under a single umbrella known as Hisb-e-Wahdat, which drew inspiration from the Islamic Revolution in Iran and proceeded to establish a stable fiefdom in central Afghanistan. Iran was also initially supportive of Hisb-e-Wahdat when it sought to strengthen its position in Kabul after the Mujahidin takeover of April 1992. However, it later chose to lend its support to Masoud, judging that its best interests lay in this direction, and so distanced itself from Hisb-e-Wahdat, in spite of the Afshar massacre of February 1993.

Iran was also influenced in its policy on Afghanistan by a struggle with Saudi Arabia for pre-eminence within the Islamic world so that, when the Sunni Taliban emerged in October 1994, the Iranian government immediately saw this as a potential attempt by Saudi Arabia, with the support of the USA, to enhance the power of the Sunni bloc within the Islamic world *vis-à-vis* Iran. The capture of Herat by the Taliban in September 1995 increased this sense of threat. This was heightened by the memory of an horrific attack alleged to have been carried out by a Sunni group on the Shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad the previous year. Iran immediately closed the border, though many thousands of professionals from western Afghanistan were permitted to apply for visas.

These people further enlarged the Afghan refugee population in Iran which, by 1992, had reached 2.9 million as a result of various waves of movement out of Afghanistan provoked by the Soviet invasion and by periodic crop failures in central Afghanistan. This population was mainly concentrated in the cities of Iran, where refugees fended for themselves as economic migrants but benefited, at least in the early years, from generous subsidies on basic essentials and from free access to education and health care. This population has been both Shi'a and Sunni, with a preponderance of Persian-speakers. The Hazaras, in spite of their Shi'a allegiance, have tended to suffer disproportionately from public and police antipathy to the Afghan presence because their Central Asian ancestry has made them more obviously visible as Afghans.

Iran's antipathy towards the Taliban was increased when the Taliban took Mazar in August 1998; in the process, eight Iranian diplomats and an Iranian journalist were killed. Iran demanded that the perpetrators be arrested and punished and, in order to give greater weight to its demands, proceeded to stage large-scale troop movements along Iran's border with Afghanistan. It is difficult to be clear how serious the threat of war between the two countries was at this point, with strong popular outrage in Iran countered by a more measured response within the Iranian leadership, but it is likely that the mediation role played by the UN Envoy for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, had some impact in reducing the tension between the two sides and in producing a face-saving formula.

Iran's relationship with the Taliban has remained strained since that time, and Iran has placed itself very clearly on the side of the opposition forces in the ongoing conflict. Periodic rumours that Iran has been sending refugees into Afghanistan to strengthen the resistance forces were supplemented by an embarrassing report on a seizure of Iranian arms from a train crossing Central Asia *en route* to northeast Afghanistan. Further, Iran has provided refuge to many of the former Mujahidin leaders, including Ismail Khan, both before his imprisonment by the Taliban in 1997 and since his escape from prison in March 2000.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has been one of the more low-profile of Afghanistan's neighbours in recent years, but has nonetheless had a major impact on events by funding the development of *madrasahs* in the 1980s and by lending financial support to the Mujahidin until 1991. The open support given to Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War by certain Mujahidin parties, and their denunciation of US military involvement in the Gulf and Saudi support for it, caused the Saudis to withdraw their support. However, their decision at this point to divert their financial assistance to parties such as Jamiat al-Ulema al-Islami in Pakistan has undoubtedly strengthened the power base of the Taliban. More recently, following the US air strikes of August 1998 and the defiant assertion by the Taliban that they would continue to provide hospitality to the Saudi, Osama bin Laden, who was actively campaigning for the USA to withdraw its forces from the Arabian peninsula, Saudi Arabia discontinued its support. It also lowered its level of diplomatic representation, having been one of only three countries, along with Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates, which accorded diplomatic recognition to the Taliban when they first captured Mazar in May 1997.

Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE cut their diplomatic relations with the Taliban following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001. As noted above, Saudi Arabia has also had a major influence on the creed of the Taliban and on that of associated parties such as Jamiat-al-Ulema al-Islami. It is likely that there is widespread support within Saudi Arabia for the Taliban, exemplified by collections within mosques for their cause.

Such individual support is also present among the various states of the Arabian Gulf, where large numbers of Afghans are employed as migrant workers, for the most part working in the most menial jobs. Dubai has become a major *entrepôt* in the smuggling trade that involves Afghanistan, Pakistan and others in the region.

Pakistan and the Taliban

Mention has already been made of Pakistan's strategic objectives in relation to Afghanistan and Central Asia, and of its role as an agent of US military support to the Mujahidin during the period of Soviet occupation. Pakistan has given strong diplomatic support to the Taliban, according it recognition in May 1997 and acting as an advocate on its behalf in international fora. It has

denied providing any military support. A recent Human Rights Watch report suggested that arms supplies to the Taliban were reaching it through commercial channels, some operated by former Pakistani military officers. However, the same report stated that, in its view, it would have been difficult for the Taliban to have carried out its major offensives without significant advice on military strategy and logistics support. The government of Benazir Bhutto was thought to be particularly active in its support to the Taliban, through the efforts of the then-Interior Minister, Naseerullah Babar, who made a much-publicized journey across Afghanistan to Central Asia shortly before the Taliban takeover of Kandahar. The Taliban have also, as noted, drawn significant support from Jamiat-al-Ulema al-Islami and other radical parties. In addition, Pakistani traders and other entrepreneurs with interests in trade with Central Asia and in the illegal economy of smuggling, drugs and timber, are thought to have provided resources to the Taliban on an important scale.

At the same time, it is clear that elements within the Pakistan government have been distinctly uncomfortable about the close links with the Taliban and the increased radicalism that their movement has engendered in Pakistan and the wider region. There have been particular concerns at the Talibanization process that is growing apace in the tribal areas of North West Frontier Province and in the adjacent cities and towns of the province, and much debate as to how great a threat this poses to the integrity of Pakistan as a state. One of the final acts of the former President, Nawaz Sharif, before he was ousted by General Pervez Musharraf in a military coup in October 1999, was to demand that the Taliban close the paramilitary training camps that Pakistan and others claimed they were supporting, despite their denials. Musharraf has given very mixed messages, expressing strong concerns through his Interior Minister, Moinuddin Haider, that the Taliban have provided sanctuary to certain Pakistanis wanted for planning attacks against Shi'as in Pakistan and taking action to clamp down on smuggling from Afghanistan, while stating that Pakistan should provide support to the Taliban because of the common Pushtun heritage. This latter statement inevitably provoked outrage amongst non-Pushtun Afghans in Afghanistan and within the diaspora, and served to reinforce the view consistently expressed by Masoud that the Taliban were a Pakistan-sponsored colonizing force.

It was far from clear whether Musharraf was having any significant success in tackling his major areas of concern, notably corruption and the rise of radical Islam, prior to the 11 September attacks on the USA, and he would appear to have proved himself to be relatively impotent in the face of these powerful forces, in spite of strong pressures from the USA in connection with negotiations for a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). He has also been under pressure from the Governor of North-West Frontier Province, amongst others, to call a halt to any further inflow of Afghan refugees in response to the heavy fighting which commenced in September 2000 in northeastern Afghanistan and the serious drought in many areas of the country. Thus, with Pakistan having reduced its refugee population from the high of 3.2 million created by the Soviet invasion, most of whom were

Pushtun, to 1.2 million, it is now facing another refugee crisis but without the necessary level of international support to cope with it.

Relations with the West

The international community, through the mechanism of the UN, has consistently denied diplomatic recognition to the Taliban, the only exceptions being Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. However, the USA appeared to be giving tacit support to the movement when it backed proposals by the US oil company, UNOCAL, to construct a pipeline across Afghanistan. This was in spite of protests by a growing feminist lobby concerned at the gender-related policies of the Taliban.

The attacks on the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam on 7 August 1998 brought about a significant change in approach. The US government issued public statements naming Osama bin Laden, who was then living in Afghanistan and was advocating the use of force to secure the removal of the US military presence in Saudi Arabia, as a key suspect in the orchestration of the attacks. It demanded that the Taliban extradite him to face legal proceedings. When the Taliban insisted that he was their guest and that they would only extradite him to another Islamic country, and then only if the USA was to provide convincing evidence of his involvement, the US government opted, on 20 August 1998, to launch air strikes on what was reported to be a terrorist training base in Afghanistan and on a pharmaceutical factory in the Sudan allegedly producing chemical weapons for Osama bin Laden. The air strikes had the immediate effect of radicalizing the political environment and in raising both Osama bin Laden and the Taliban to the status of heroes amongst radical elements in the Islamic world, particularly those in Pakistan. It thus became much easier for them to recruit fighting forces amongst the students of Islamic *madrasahs* in Pakistan at a time when their support in the Pushtun heartland of southern Afghanistan was waning, and it was proving more difficult for them to persuade tribal and other leaders to allow their sons to fight.

This radicalism was further enhanced when the UN introduced sanctions against Afghanistan in October 1999 as an additional measure to secure Osama bin Laden's extradition. Although these only restricted the use of Ariana Afghan Airlines for international flights and froze the assets of Osama bin Laden, they were seen by the Taliban and their supporters from other parts of the Islamic world as a hostile act.

The subsequent sanctions imposed in December 2000, which were clearly targeted at the Taliban and, amongst other things, placed an arms embargo on the Taliban but not on opposition forces, brought most of the radical parties in Pakistan together to express their collective opposition to the sanctions and their solidarity with the Taliban. The US-led military action against Afghanistan has clearly accelerated the Talibanization process in Pakistan. We are, therefore, perceiving a growing polarization between the West and radical elements in Afghanistan and Pakistan, with Pakistani Pushtuns being increasingly associated with this radicalization process.

These sanctions also highlighted the increasingly ambivalent role of the UN in having a duty to provide impartial humanitarian assistance to the population while, at the same time, acting as the vehicle for the expression of the collective will of the international community. Although the Taliban are well aware of the distinction between the humanitarian and political roles of the UN, they have accused the UN of being an instrument of US foreign policy. The mediation role of the UN Special Envoy for Afghanistan has also been severely undermined, to the point where the Taliban refused an offer by Japan to hold peace talks on the grounds that they would not be willing to have the UN present.

The sanctions also strengthened the hardliners in their suspicion of and hostility towards Western aid agencies. Even though many returned to Kabul after the events of July 1998, this made it increasingly difficult for agencies to operate in the country. Humanitarian agencies thus had to balance their concerns to meet the overwhelming needs of the population against their capacity, given increased constraints and levels of interference, to make a difference. Nearly all foreign aid workers left Afghanistan soon after 11 September 2001. The current drought and the disruption caused by military intervention have aggravated what were already amongst the worst human development indicators in the world to produce a humanitarian crisis with which the aid community is under-equipped to deal.

Prior to the attacks in the USA, there was already a danger that the increasing polarization created by the 1998 air strikes and subsequent sanctions would lead to growing international isolation, in which Afghanistan, and to some degree Pakistan, by virtue of its association with the Taliban and the growth of radical Islam within it, would be viewed as international pariahs.

Awareness of this danger was leading many policy-makers to reflect on whether the conflictual approach manifested in the air strikes and sanctions was proving counter-productive. Options for a more constructive form of engagement were therefore being debated. Foremost amongst these was a consideration as to whether it would be helpful to express positive appreciation of the ban on opium production introduced in July 2000. The US government decided to take such a step and, in May 2001, Colin Powell made a statement in which he indicated his welcome of the ban. Financial support was also given for farmers whose livelihoods have been affected by the ban. Europe did not commit itself on this issue.

The implications of the US-led military intervention against Afghanistan

The attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 resulted in a swift charge by the US government that Osama bin Laden was a prime suspect. The US President stated that the USA would take action against terrorists and those harbouring terrorists, under the circumstances a clear threat to the Taliban. Over the following weeks, the US government gave mixed signals, as it built up its military capacity in the region while appearing to take on board the importance of securing support from the Islamic world for any action taken. It also stressed that military action was simply one of a number of potential mechanisms to be used to tackle terrorism.

It was at this point that an initiative first taken by the former Afghan king, Zahir Shah, a year or so earlier began to gain prominence and arouse US interest. The elderly ex-king proposed bringing all the Afghan parties and tribal leaders together through the framework of an assembly, known as a *Loya Jirga*, traditionally convened in times of national crisis. The threat of military action appeared to be creating alarm in Pakistan that the USA might support the emergence of a new government based on the Northern Alliance. Pakistan was clearly concerned that, not only did the minority ethnic groups that made up the Northern Alliance have no ethnic affinity with the population of Pakistan, unlike the Pushtuns, but they had always made it very clear that they regarded the Taliban as a colonizing force orchestrated by Pakistan. Pakistan would thus lose any influence it had within Afghanistan and its hopes of creating an Islamic axis encompassing Afghanistan, the Central Asian Republics and Pakistan would be disappointed. As a result of these concerns, there were indications that Pakistan might seek to cooperate with the Zahir Shah initiative, to which the Northern Alliance were already lending their support, on the basis that moderate elements within the Taliban were included. With speculation that elements within the Pushtun tribal leadership might be tempted to support the initiative, this offered a chance that the long-standing efforts of a succession of UN envoys to negotiate agreement on the establishment of a broad-based government in Afghanistan might, at last, produce something.

The US-led military strikes on Afghanistan that began on 7 October changed the picture significantly. Pakistan's General Musharraf, forced to make a choice, opted to back the USA – and the aid and legitimacy for his own unelected Government that came with it – ending support for the Taliban. Pakistan's interests now appeared to lie in

ensuring that any successor to the Taliban in Afghanistan included sufficient Pushtun leadership, either from anti-Taliban Pushtuns, or Taliban moderates or defectors, while containing the dangerous level of anger against the military intervention at home. At the same time, the USA took care to distance itself from the Northern Alliance as a contender for government, pointing out that it was unrepresentative of Afghanistan as a whole.

The most immediate effect of the military intervention was a humanitarian disaster that developed at great speed, compounding the suffering already created by the drought and the ongoing conflict. Fear of bombardment caused the majority of the population of the cities of Kandahar, Jalalabad and Herat to flee, adding to the 1 million people already internally displaced. The World Food Programme faced an almost impossible challenge, seeking to distribute through NGOs within Afghanistan a sufficient quantity of food aid before the winter set in. UNICEF warned that deaths of children under 5 could rise by some 100,000 this winter.

The vast majority of those fleeing the cities in response to the US-led military action have sought refuge in the rural areas, further aggravating an already serious food situation. All of Afghanistan's neighbours have formally refused entry to any new influxes of refugees, although Pakistan has relaxed its border controls on a few occasions and has turned a blind eye to those paying agents to get them across the border. Humanitarian agencies are concerned that many of the sites offered by the Pakistan government to accommodate new refugees are in tribal areas that are regarded as insecure. Non-Pushtun refugees, notably Hazaras, may be at risk from the local Pushtun population, amongst whom support for the Taliban is high, and they would similarly be at risk within a camp set up by the Taliban on the Afghan side of the border. Also of concern are reports that males of fighting age have been taken from their families as they attempted to flee to Pakistan, and that they have been forcibly recruited to the fighting forces.

Human rights organizations, including MRG, appealed for any military action by US-led forces and other parties to conform with international humanitarian law and, in particular, to avoid attacks targeting civilians and other non-combatants. The Taliban, however, claimed that US bombs and rockets had killed a large number of civilians. The UN stated that a hospital had been hit in Herat and it was widely reported on 28 October that a US rocket hit a village behind Northern Alliance lines, killing 10 people.

Prospects for the future

It is difficult to speculate about the political future of Afghanistan following the US-led military intervention but some scenarios might be briefly discussed. It is likely that the Zahir Shah initiative, which might have provided a neutral framework for the relatively weakened Northern Alliance and Taliban to reach some kind of accommodation, now has less leverage. The Northern Alliance will have been emboldened by the military action against Taliban aircraft and troop positions. The Taliban will still be receiving significant support from the radical Islamic parties in Pakistan, and from former military and intelligence officers in Pakistan. It will also have been bolstered by the emergence of new volunteers willing to fight for them as a result of the US offensive. An important question is whether the Pushtun tribal leaders, who were rumoured to be sympathetic to the Zahir Shah-led initiative before 7 October, will line up behind the Taliban again rather than be seen to be supporting a US-orchestrated government-in-waiting.

If a political solution is not found, one possible scenario is that the north of Afghanistan may fall, as a consequence of the fact that the Taliban are regarded as an occupying force in the region and may find it difficult to maintain their hold under the pressure of the US offensives. However, it would be almost impossible for the Northern Alliance to take the Pushtun south, and US troops would also find it enormously difficult to overcome the fierce resistance that the Pushtun tribes could be expected to put up. There is, therefore, a possibility of a *de facto* partition of Afghanistan, at least for a period, with Herat and Kabul falling, potentially, within either camp although more naturally, by virtue of the possible predominance of non-Pushtuns within them, within a Northern Alliance-held area. If this were to happen, the Pushtuns of Afghanistan would find themselves looking eastwards to fellow Pushtuns on the other side of the border. A stronger alliance between Afghan and Pakistani Pushtuns could add to the fragmentary tendencies that already exist within Pakistan.

If the north were to be taken by the Northern Alliance without a negotiated political arrangement already in place, the potential for it to fragment into four separate fiefdoms would be significant. One might thus expect the northeast to remain with Rabbani and General Fahim, the successor to Ahmed Shah Masoud. It may be hoped that the stability that currently prevails in that area could continue, although there is considerable potential for it to fragment amongst rival commanders. If Mazar is taken, Dostam may have difficulty re-establishing the leadership position that he lost in May 1997 and the instability that was present between then and the Taliban takeover of August 1998 may again manifest itself. If Ismail Khan regains the leadership in Herat that he exercised between 1992 and 1995, going on his past record, he would have a good chance of achieving stability in northwest Afghanistan. Whether he would, again, try to capture southwest Afghanistan, is open to question. In central Afghanistan, Hisb-e-Wahdat could be expected to take control and might be able to maintain its position without

splitting, as happened in 1994. If a loose federal structure could be agreed, there is a reasonable possibility that stability could be achieved. However, if one or other leader tries to extend his territory, civil war could again ensue. The risk of fragmentation within the areas controlled by Dostam and Rabbani would also represent an ever-present threat to stability.

If an alternative scenario develops whereby US-led forces are able to secure military control over the whole of Afghanistan, the US government will face enormous difficulties if it appears to be orchestrating the composition of a new government. It is very important, therefore, that the vehicle for the negotiation of a political outcome to the current conflict remains the UN. Even then, suspicions will be strong that the USA has played a major role in securing the final outcome. Clearly, any such government will be vulnerable to accusations that it is a puppet of the USA and it may require long-term US military backing to maintain its position and ensure security.

The peace process

The UN has been engaged in seeking a peaceful outcome to the Afghan conflict since the Soviet invasion. It was instrumental in negotiating the Geneva Accords of April 1988 which led to the Soviet military withdrawal of February 1989. However, a number of UN envoys have since sought to identify various power-sharing formulae but have been unable to secure agreement between the parties at any stage. In recent years, the UN has focused its efforts increasingly on those who are thought to be fuelling the war by bringing together Afghanistan's six neighbours, with the USA and the Russian Federation, through the Six plus Two Group.

Within three weeks of the start of the military intervention, the UN Special Envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, commenced a series of talks with key states in the region, as well as Afghan opposition groups. Various proposals had been mooted for a UN peacekeeping force, predominantly Muslim in composition, to support any political settlement. However, that would depend on there being a peace to be kept, and both Brahimi and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan appeared anxious to emphasize that the UN would not be drawn into performing impossible tasks.

Afghanistan's two decades of conflict have been sustained by the sponsorship of other states, including Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the Soviet Union/Russian Federation and the USA. A formula to end the conflict will require not only the agreement of the Afghan parties but also clear commitments from these other states to enable the Afghan people to decide their own future, with at the same time the support of the international community to help rebuild the country. The UN process centred on the Six plus Two Group therefore still offers the most promising vehicle for the negotiation of a wider political settlement in the wake of the US-led military action.

Conclusions

In considering the dominant characteristics of the present situation in Afghanistan, we can identify certain patterns that have been apparent for at least the past century. Very much in evidence have been the repeated efforts of the Pushtuns to reassert their pre-eminent role within the government of Afghanistan, combined with the periodic oppression of other ethnic and religious groups. There has also been the historical determination of the religious and tribal leadership to ensure the seclusion of women and to resist attempts to increase their exposure to the outside world through education, employment and health care. Having said that, we should note that, at the same time as the Taliban imposed greater restrictions on women, the experience of exile led to a greater openness to female education and employment amongst the rural population.

The hopes of many observers that the Taliban might moderate their policies in response to the responsibilities of government were not realized. Although there has been some relaxation of the restrictions placed on female access to education, employment and health care at the local level over certain periods as a result of negotiations between communities, humanitarian agencies and the authorities, it is not possible to discern an overall positive trend.

The Taliban built on foundations laid by the Mujahidin but introduced a much simpler and less intellectual vision. Whether by accident or design, this vision served wider agendas, notably those of the Pakistan government and international radical Islamic networks. The entrepreneurs of the illegal economy have also stepped in to take advantage of the weakened state infrastructure. As a result, we see an evolving picture of enormous complexity as religion, ethnicity and differing societal and geo-political agendas are intertwined, only to be rendered even more complex by issues relating to opium production, smuggling and the arms trade. Hovering on the sidelines are the oil interests, waiting for an opportunity to achieve greater access to Central Asian oil, with pipelines across Afghanistan among the options available to them.

The US-led military intervention has added enormously to the complexity, and to the risks. With the escalation of conflict, the hardening of positions and the likelihood that cities and other territory will change control between different groups, there is an acute danger of violent repression and revenge killings, following the pattern already established in the conflict in recent years. The alleged massacres of mainly Hazara civilians by the Taliban at Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998, Robatak Pass in 2000 and Yakawlang in 2001, the reported forced displacement of Tajik populations in the Shomali valley and in Taloqan, numerous allegations of detention without charge and torture of ethnic minorities, and public statements by local Taliban authorities threatening minorities, all point to a systematic pattern of grave violations of minority rights by

the Taliban. There is therefore a clear concern that the current military offensives against the Taliban may result in further abuses against ethnic and religious minorities perceived to side with the opposition. The record of human rights abuses perpetrated by members of the Northern Alliance, (including Jamiat-i-Islami, Hisb-e-Wahdat and Uzbek forces) indicates that there is also a grave risk of killings against Taliban prisoners, or Pushtun communities perceived to support the Taliban, if Mazar-i-Sharif and other areas are wrested from Taliban control.

The Taliban are likely to remain very much within the fold of the international radical Islamic networks unless other influences and pressures have a moderating effect. It has to be recognized, in this regard, that it has become increasingly difficult to strengthen moderate opinion in recent months. The approach that the international community has taken has been one factor in further radicalizing the Taliban. A series of hostile acts, commencing with the US air strikes of August 1998 and moving through the sanctions of October 1999 and December 2000 to the US-led military attacks on Afghanistan from October 2001, have set a tone which has been instrumental in pushing the Taliban into a corner in which they have increasingly looked to the radicals from other parts of the Islamic world in their midst as their primary reference point. There is, thus, a much greater emphasis now on a pan-Islamic position in opposition to US hegemony than was apparent in the early days of the regime.

There is, of course, a spectrum of opinion within the Taliban but it may be expected that, in the wake of the US-led military intervention, the moderates within the movement will have little influence over policy and that a small core of hardliners are determining outcomes, with possible reference to radicals from other parts of the Islamic world in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. Certainly, there is increasing expressed solidarity with the Taliban in evidence from many of the radical parties in Pakistan, particularly Jamiat-al-Ulema al-Islami. Similarly, Osama bin Laden has continued to speak out in support of the Taliban, stressing their importance as a key movement acting in defiance of US hegemony.

The Taliban have also been seen as a model by conservative tribal groups in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province and by disaffected elements elsewhere in Pakistan. This has led to real fears, amongst moderate elements within Pakistan, that a Talibanization process will take hold and that this could result in the emergence of a radical Islamic government in Pakistan. Before the events of 11 September, there were already indications that Pakistani professionals and the intelligentsia were increasingly seeking to migrate to the West. At the same time, the population of Afghanistan was feeling estranged from the values that the Taliban movement espoused yet feared the anarchy that might result if the movement were to collapse. Young men were leaving Afghanistan in increasing

numbers in order to escape forced recruitment by both the Taliban and the opposition, with the result that the Taliban were having to rely ever more on volunteers from other parts of the Islamic world for their fighting forces.

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 have brought even more into focus the dilemma as to how Western governments should extract themselves from the downward spiral in which hostile reactions produce increased radicalism and a greater risk of further attacks. While engagement and bridge-building are clearly necessary, it is obviously impossible for Western governments to ignore mass crimes against their civilians and difficult for movements such as the Taliban to move away from the radical positions generated by belligerent acts by Western powers. The fact that such acts produce enormous support for radical organizations and movements makes it difficult for them to be seen to be abandoning the cause. The growing willingness of radicals to martyr themselves in the cause of a perceived *jihad* against the USA makes compromise even less achievable. The West therefore needs to think carefully about how it engages with the Islamic world, and whether a more constructive relationship can be aimed at, in spite of a long history of hostility and mistrust.

At the same time, it needs to play its part in extracting Afghanistan from a crisis that has become overwhelming and which has been of its making. It is likely that the military action taken by the USA and its allies will have made it very much more difficult to achieve a political solution to the Afghan conflict, if only because it will have further polarized positions and brought on board many more external actors, including large numbers of volunteers from the wider Islamic world. However, if, at some point, the US-led military action is seen to have achieved its objectives and comes to an end, the international community will have to find a way of putting the pieces together again.

At this stage, it will be very important that any new political arrangement is inclusive of all groups in Afghanistan. It must also take on board the historical grievances felt by the minority ethnic groups in relation to the Pushtun dominance of government and by Shi'as in relation to the majority Sunni population. If these grievances are not effectively addressed, the seeds for future conflict will be ever present. This does not mean, of course, that the needs of Pushtuns should not be given due weight. However, it is not reasonable that the power they enjoy should be disproportionate to their position within the overall population.



Recommendations

To the international community:

1. Proposals for a political settlement to the conflict in Afghanistan should have regard to the interests of all sections of the Afghan population, include the active participation of all ethnic groups and the main religious minorities, and provide for their appropriate representation in government.
2. Diplomatic support should be given to the UN Special Envoy to Afghanistan in his attempts to find a settlement to the conflict. Members of the Six plus Two Group (bringing together the six states that border Afghanistan plus the USA and the Russian Federation) should use their influence with the parties in conflict in Afghanistan to promote a peaceful settlement; and consideration should be given to the UN convening a peace-keeping force for deployment once an agreement has been reached.
3. Any political outcome should seek to address the grievances felt by minority ethnic groups in Afghanistan towards the long-standing Pushtun dominance of government. It should also address the rights of the Shi'a minority to protection and freedom from discrimination.
4. Resources should be committed to Afghanistan on a sufficient scale to bring it out of its current humanitarian crisis and strengthen local coping strategies. The international community should make a long-term commitment to the reconstruction of the country, in cooperation with Afghan communities.
5. Priority should be given to action that seeks to address, in cooperation with Afghan communities, the rights of women in relation to access to employment, education and health care, and in relation to freedom of movement and democratic participation.
6. In the long term, efforts need to be made to create a safe, secure and habitable environment so that all refugees and internally displaced persons from ethnic and religious groups can return to their homelands. Such efforts include support to assist returnees to reclaim land and property and rebuild their futures.

To the parties to the conflict:

7. All parties to the conflict in Afghanistan should abide by international humanitarian law, including the fundamental duty to protect civilians at all times. Indiscriminate attacks which fail to distinguish between military and civilian objects must be avoided, as must attacks on military objects which have a disproportionate impact on civilians.
8. All parties to the conflict should avoid action which dis-

rupts the delivery of humanitarian aid, and should enable such aid to be made available to all ethnic and religious groups without discrimination and without risk to their lives.

To countries of refuge:

9. Pakistan, Iran and other neighbouring countries should ensure that refugees fleeing Afghanistan are able to enter through their land borders without hindrance. Under no circumstances should refugees be refouled, or returned to a country where their lives or freedom are at risk. Camps or other facilities for refugees or internally displaced persons should not be situated in places where they are at risk from the local population.
10. Other potential countries of refuge, including European states and other developed countries such as Australia, should honour their obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention and provide a safe haven for refugees arriving from Afghanistan fleeing persecution.

To the Afghan government:

11. In the long term, any future government of Afghanistan must take steps to break the cycle of conflict by: supporting democratic structures which give a genuine voice to all ethnic, religious and linguistic groups; devolving real power to decentralized regional or local structures where appropriate; promoting religious and ethnic tolerance through education and awareness-raising programmes and embarking upon a process of reconciliation; supporting the development of an educational system based on a wide-ranging curriculum for all children and young people in Afghanistan. By implementing these measures Afghanistan will be taking steps to comply with its international obligations under the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
12. The Afghan government should ensure that women are able to enjoy the full range of human rights, on an equal basis with men, including the right to free primary education, to employment, to freedom of movement, to appropriate health services, in accordance with Afghanistan's obligations under the ICCPR. Afghanistan should also take steps to ratify and implement the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.
13. Children should be protected from forced labour and conscription into armed groups, in accordance with Afghanistan's obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and steps should be taken to reduce and eventually eradicate child labour

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