

Persecution of ethnic Pashtuns continues in northern Afghanistan

Ben Nichols, Peter Symonds
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Persistent reports from a number of human rights organisations have catalogued the widespread persecution of ethnic Pashtuns in northern Afghanistan over the past nine months since the fall of the Taliban regime. The militia of the Northern Alliance, backed by the US, seized control of the area, including the main northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, in November as the Taliban forces crumbled.

The Northern Alliance is a disparate coalition of various ethnic-based militia groups—including the Uzbek-based Junbish-e-Milli led by General Abdul Rashid Dostum, the Tajik-grouping Jamiat-e-Islami led by General Atta Mohammad and Defence Minister Mohammad Fahim, and the Hazara-based Hizb-e-Wahdat led Haji Mohammed Mohaqiq.

Each of these competing groups has been seeking to carve out its own patch of territory, resulting in a series of armed clashes since the beginning of the year. The situation in Mazar-e-Sharif is chaotic, even after a UN brokered deal in February to set up a mixed security force of 600 soldiers. The US-based Human Rights Watch reported last month that, in practice, the mixed force exists alongside two autonomous police forces—one controlled by Jamiat-e-Islami and the other by Hizb-e-Wahdat—as well as a series of unauthorised military posts maintained by each of the factions. Not only local Afghans but humanitarian aid workers have been the target of violent attacks.

The position of ethnic Pashtuns is particularly precarious. While Pashtuns form a majority of the population in the country as a whole, they are a minority in the north, which is dominated by ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras. Moreover, whether or not they supported the Taliban, they are nevertheless identified with the fundamentalist militia, which derived the bulk of its support from southern Pashtun tribes. In the late 1990s, fighting between the Taliban and the various militias now comprising the Northern Alliance left a bitter legacy of ethnic animosity, the result of appalling atrocities on all sides.

With no militia of their own, ethnic Pashtuns in northern Afghanistan, many of whom have roots going back

generations, have been the subject of torture, rape and murder. The extent of the violence was brought to light in a lengthy Human Rights Watch report published in April entitled “Paying for the Taliban’s Crimes: Abuses Against Ethnic Pashtuns in Northern Afghanistan”. Based on eyewitness accounts, the report described how Pashtun villages were attacked after being disarmed by local militia commanders. Some families were stripped of their personal possessions; others were beaten and tortured. There were also some cases of rape.

One villager, AS, described to Human Rights Watch his treatment at the hands of armed Hazaras. “My hands were tied, and they were beating me with their AK-47 assault rifles. They were accusing me of being Taliban and Al Qaeda.” Two days earlier, an Uzbek commander disarmed the villagers and left some of his soldiers there. Shortly after, however, 300 Hazara soldiers stormed the village and the Uzbek soldiers fled. According to accounts given by survivors, the Hazara soldiers demanded money, guns and anything valuable—those who failed to comply were killed.

A Pashtun woman explained why she had fled to a refugee camp. “I married my husband when I was around 10 years old and I have eight children aged 15 to 26. The Uzbek forces came to our village and beat my husband to make him give them money. He said he had no money so they beat him to death. I saw what happened. Seven or eight Uzbek soldiers that we did not know, came to our village and into our house. They beat him with the guns, feet and sticks. The children also saw them beat their father and ran. I told them we do not have money. Where should I get money to pay you, so you do not beat my husband?”

A 60-year-old Pashtun man from Faryab province said: “My brother died when my three nephews were very small so I have been caring for them and have been their father since he died. Three months ago, all three of them disappeared. One was brought to me and had a bullet hole in his head (the frontal area). The nephews were walking together and someone shot one in the head. The one who we found dead was 12; the 20- and 30-year-old boys are

missing.”

Other Pashtuns fled their villages after seeing what was happening and because of the lack of food and other basic necessities. Human Rights Watch stated that thousands had fled their homes. Some have taken up residence in private homes while others have gone to abandoned villages or refugee camps. Many travelled to the town of Chaman near the Pakistani border in a bid to find refuge in Pakistan. In the first three months of the year, some 47,000 Afghans attempted to cross into Pakistan but most were denied entry.

In February, the administration of transitional president Hamid Karzai established a commission to investigate crimes committed against Pashtuns. Nothing eventuated, however. General Dostum was Deputy Defence Minister at the time. A number of high-level militia leaders actually accompanied the commission’s investigators as they toured the area and spoke to local Pashtuns. As a token, Dostum relieved several of his commanders but the abuse of ethnic Pashtuns continued.

Even the refugee camps are far from safe. A Human Rights Watch report published at the end of June described conditions in two camps near Mazar-e-Sharif—Camp 65 dominated by the Junbish-e-Milli faction and the Sakhi Camp controlled by Jamiat-e-Islami. Shortly after the fall of the Taliban, both Junbish and Jamiat fighters initially targeted Pashtuns at the Sakhi Camp.

The report explained: “According to residents and aid workers interviewed by Human Rights Watch, Pashtuns living in the camp faced widespread sexual violence and looting by Jamiat and Junbish militiamen. An entire section of the camp housing an estimated 400 Pashtun families was destroyed, and lay in ruins at the time of Human Rights Watch’s visit to the camp in early June. Many of the Pashtun residents subsequently fled the camp, with some reportedly heading toward the largely Pashtun town of Balkh.”

As fighting between the Uzbek Junbish and the Tajik Jamiat intensified, the targets also included civilians from other ethnic groups. In early May, the Junbish militia reoccupied sections of Camp 65, a former military base, and forcibly evicted many refugees and bulldozed their dwellings. Those evicted were largely Tajiks and ethnic Arabs, who were relocated to the outskirts of the camp without easy access to water. Male residents were forced to act as nightwatchmen and to help dig trenches. When the refugees sent a delegation to protest, the two representatives were severely beaten.

Outside the camps, the extortion of villagers is continuing. The report stated: “While the intensive looting of Pashtun communities associated with the collapse of the Taliban has subsided in Shoor Darya, regular demands for money by

commanders appear to be compounding the impoverishment of local Pashtuns. The practice, as described to Human Rights Watch, involves the collection of money in each village by tribal leaders who are appointed by the commanders and backed by the threat of force.”

In a report issued in May, the US-based Physicians for Human Rights found a similar pattern of abuse inside the Shaidayee camp near the western city of Herat, which is dominated by the warlord Ismail Khan. While Pashtuns were not the only target, they were more likely to be the subject of violence than other ethnic groups.

A survey of the camp found that refugees had left their villages for a various of reasons: lack of food, land seizure by Uzbek forces, looting, the need for emergency services, drought, to escape fighting, or being forced to leave by militia forces. About 45 percent of the new arrivals were Pashtuns and 77 percent of the reported complaints came from Pashtuns. The survey found that 46 percent of abuses involved killings, 23 percent beatings, and 25 percent explosive or gunshot wounds.

Physicians for Human Rights stated that there were about 1.2 million internally displaced persons or refugees inside Afghanistan. Only 30,000 have returned to their villages since March, usually to find that their houses have been either looted or burnt to the ground. Without food or work, there is little hope of a return to a normal life.

While the international media and Washington attempt to paint a picture of an Afghanistan that is being rebuilt, the reality is quite different. These reports provide a glimpse of the appalling conditions in Afghanistan where large sections of the population are subject to the arbitrary rule of competing militia groups and face great difficulties obtaining basic necessities.

The chief responsibility for this tragic situation rests with Washington, which used the Northern Alliance and various Pashtun militia groups in the south to oust the Taliban regime. The result is that the US has replaced one group of rightwing armed thugs with a proliferation of others, each competing to carve out a patch of turf and to extort money to finance their activities. The US has perpetuated the chaos by supporting, arming and financing particular warlords and militia commanders to assist in its ongoing military operations.



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