

THE INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO END GENOCIDE

GENOCIDE RISK ALERT

(Washington, D.C., 24 May 2001) Genocide Watch, Coordinator of The International Campaign to End Genocide issued a Genocide Risk Alert today, condemning the decision by Afghanistan's Taliban to force Hindus to wear yellow cloth markers to set them apart from Muslims. Genocide Watch President Dr. Gregory Stanton said, "Any easy identifier of a disfavored minority brings ethnic cleansing or genocide one step closer."

The Edict

On 21 May 2001, the Taliban authorities in Kabul, Afghanistan issued an edict requiring members of the Hindu religious minority to wear yellow cloth markings to distinguish them from Muslims. The edict is a fatwa, a religious decree from the Council of the Ulema, Islamic scholars, implementing decrees issued in 1999. The decrees require non-Muslim women to wear veils and yellow cloth so that Muslims can keep their distance from them, require non-Muslim men to wear a thumb-size piece of yellow cloth whenever they venture outdoors, and require non-Muslims to identify their houses by placing two meter long yellow cloths on their rooftops.

Chief of the Taliban's religious police, Maulawi Abdul Wali, officially known as the Minister for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice, said "Non-Muslims should have a distinctive mark in their dress so that they can be identified." Wali said Taliban authorities are enforcing the edict only against Hindus because Sikhs already wear distinctive dress. There is only one Jew left in the country, and only a few Christians remain. He said the purpose of the edict is to "protect" the Hindus from the Taliban religious police who would otherwise round up Hindus for mandatory Muslim prayer and other impositions of Islamic law. However, the stigmatizing side of the edict is revealed by the 1999 decrees accompanying the dress code, which also forbade non-Muslims from living in the same houses as Muslims, forbade non-Muslims from criticizing Muslims, and forbade non-Muslims from building places of worship. In January 2001 another decree imposed the death penalty on Afghans who convert from Islam to either Judaism or Christianity. Afghan identification cards already list an individual's religion. Forcing minorities to wear distinctive clothing makes the marking public, and renders those who wear it even more vulnerable to police and mob violence.

The Risk

The International Campaign to End Genocide considers the mandatory symbolic marking of targeted groups to be one of the most ominous warning signs of potential ethnic cleansing or genocide. (Although often accompanied by acts of genocide, ethnic cleansing – the forced deportation of a group – can be distinguished from genocide, the intentional destruction, in whole or in part, of a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group.) Ethnic cleansing in Afghanistan is already well underway. Afghanistan had a population of over 50,000 Hindus before 1992. The number has now dropped to a few thousand after most fled anti-Hindu violence. In December 1992, after the Babri Masjid (Mosque) in India was destroyed by fanatical Hindus, Islamic militants in Afghanistan burned and looted Hindu temples and Sikh gurdwaras in Kabul, Kandahar, and Jalalabad.

Under the Taliban, Afghanistan has become increasingly intolerant and xenophobic. In the name of their narrow interpretation of Islam, the Taliban are attempting to “purify” and “cleanse” Afghanistan. In March, they ordered the destruction of all religious images, including two monumental rock-cut Buddhist statues at Bamiyan over 1000 years old. Ideologies of “purification” are especially likely to support ethnic cleansing or genocide with the misguided doctrine that they will improve society. Genocide is justified as removal of “impure” or “corrupt” members of the body politic.

By discriminating against Hindus, Afghanistan is violating one of the most widely accepted international treaties, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, to which Afghanistan itself is a party. One effect of the Taliban edict will be to make Afghan Hindus hostages to the politics of the region. In March an extremist Hindu group burned copies of the Koran near a mosque in Amritsar, India, in what they said was retaliation for destruction of the statues in Afghanistan. If Afghan Muslims retaliate against Hindus in Kabul, the situation will become even more polarized. Polarization is one of the most important preparatory stages of genocide.

Hindus are currently not even the group most at risk of genocide in Afghanistan. The Taliban have demonstrated their capacity for genocidal violence in massacres of civilian members of the Hazara Shi’ite ethnic minority in Mazar-e-Sharif in August 1998, Robatak Pass in May 2000, and Yakaolang in January 2001. In Yakaolang, the Taliban rounded up and mass-murdered at least 300 civilian men, including staff members of humanitarian organizations. They have cut off whole areas from relief supplies, shut down hospitals, closed down many U.N. activities, and expelled critical journalists, preventing

observation by outsiders. Sealing territory off from outside view often accompanies planning for crimes against humanity.

Symbolic identification is the preparatory stage just before extermination in genocide. It is the stage just before forced deportation in the case of ethnic cleansing. It facilitates the rapid implementation of policies of ethnic cleansing or genocide. Identification of individuals and houses speeds the rounding up of the targeted group when the decision is made to do so. It is also a terror tactic that creates an attitude of submission among members of the victim group.

The most famous case of symbolic identification of a victim group was the Nazi use of yellow stars to mark Jews. History is replete with other examples. In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge required deportees from the Eastern Zone to wear blue and white scarves. "It was the killing sign," said a survivor. In Rwanda, Hutus and Tutsis were identified as such on their personal ID cards, which then became rapid methods to select those who would be killed during the Rwandan genocide. Symbolic identifications began as markers for discrimination and turned into signs for genocide.

The Response

The most effective campaign of negation against symbols of identification is to render them meaningless. The most famous example was when the Nazis decided not to impose the yellow star in Denmark because they knew that many non-Jewish Danes, including the Danish King, would not cooperate, and according to legend, even threatened to wear the yellow stars if they were imposed, rendering the Nazi symbol for Jews meaningless. In France, some wore the yellow star in solidarity with Jews, with the same effect. Such a campaign could be undertaken in quiet resistance to the yellow cloth in Afghanistan as well. Muslims could be encouraged to wear the yellow cloth in protest against the discriminatory policies of the Taliban. Indeed people around the world could wear small patches of yellow cloth as part of this preventive protest.

Four steps should be taken to counteract the Taliban's edict requiring Hindus to wear yellow cloth as distinctive markings:

1. The European Parliament, the United States Congress, and the United Nations Security Council should pass resolutions denouncing this decision by the Taliban and demand that it be rescinded.

2. Afghanistan should be brought by another State-Party before the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination as a violator of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.
3. Muslims and people of other religions in Afghanistan and around the world should be encouraged to wear bits of yellow cloth in solidarity with the Hindus of Afghanistan. (A pattern for a yellow cloth of protest is [hyperlinked](#).)
4. A Genocide Risk Alert by all early warning organizations should be kept on Afghanistan for signs of further movement toward ethnic cleansing or genocide.

The International Campaign to End Genocide is a coalition of human rights organizations founded at the Hague Appeal for Peace in 1999. The Coordinator is **Genocide Watch**. Telephone: 1-703-448-0222. FAX: 1-703-448-6665. E-mail: info@genocidewatch.org . Website: www.genocidewatch.org .