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February 2016 update on Hazara Asylum Seekers from Afghanistan: the increasing dangers they would face if they return

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These papers are available on our website: bmrsg.org.au/research-material/afghanistan/

A. Introduction

This is the ninth paper in my series on “Hazara Asylum Seekers from Afghanistan: the increasing dangers they would face if they return”, beginning in September 2012.

Since my September 2015 update on this subject, there have been a number of very significant developments. Notably the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has published two Country Information reports, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) has published a very detailed analysis, and there have been many other reports and analyses related to violent incidents and events. All of these point to further escalation of dangers facing the Afghanistan population in general and Hazaras in particular.

1. DFAT Reports of 18 September 2015⁵

Escalation of violence

A key emphasis of “*DFAT Country Information Report Afghanistan 18 September*”

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² “*Hazara Asylum Seekers from Afghanistan: the increasing dangers they would face if they return*” [this and the following updates all available at <http://www.bmrsg.org.au/research-material/afghanistan/>

³ http://www.bmrsg.org.au/compassion/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Hazara-Update5-Mar_2015.pdf.

⁴ <http://www.bmrsg.org.au/compassion/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Hazara-update-Sept2015.pdf>.

⁵ DFAT Country Information Report Afghanistan 18 September 2015; DFAT Thematic Report on Conditions in Kabul 18 September 2015. These reports do not seem to be accessible on the internet.

2015” is the escalation of violence all over Afghanistan during the past two years. For example:

*2.5 Insurgent forces are contesting the Afghan Government’s control in many areas. **No part of the country can be considered totally free from conflict-related violence, which escalated markedly over the course of 2014 and 2015** (see ‘Security Situation’ below). As a result, economic development, health care and education services are affected in many parts of the country. [emphasis added]*

2.31 According to the UNAMA Annual Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, the conflict in Afghanistan resulted in 10,548 civilian casualties (3,699 deaths and 6,849 injured) in 2014, a 25 per cent increase in civilian deaths and a 21 per cent increase in civilian injuries compared to 2013. The number of civilian casualties is the highest recorded since the UN began tracking civilian casualties in 2009. . . . In its 2015 mid-year update, UNAMA recorded a further one per cent increase in civilian casualties in the first six months of 2015 compared to the same period in 2014.

2.35 Insurgents regularly conduct high-profile attacks in many parts of Afghanistan, including Kabul. *Common targets for insurgent attacks are government institutions, political figures, the ANDSF, Mission Resolute Support (the NATO-led mission that succeeded the ISAF mission on 1 January 2015), other security forces, foreign missions and international organisations, although mosques, schools, hospitals and other civilian targets are also vulnerable. Attacks can include small arms fire, indirect (rocket) fire, suicide bombings, car bombs, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and complex attacks involving a combination of these methods. In 2014, UNAMA documented 7,545 civilian casualties (including 2,643 deaths) from attacks carried out by anti-government elements, an 18 per cent increase on the previous year and 72 per cent of the total civilian casualties related to the conflict (see paragraph 2.31 above). Although attacks are often directed at specific targets, the methods of attack can be indiscriminate and often result in civilian casualties. [emphasis added]*

Further commentary on this issue is provided below.

Security in Kabul

Previous DFAT COI reports on Afghanistan have been at pains to downplay the dangers facing residents of Kabul, in spite of abundant contrary evidence. Now there is at least qualified admission of an increase in violence in Kabul and recognition of a dangerous security situation. For example:

*(DFAT Afghanistan) 2.31 . . . Soon after the release of this update, **on 7 August 2015, a series of attacks in Kabul resulted in an estimated 355 civilian casualties (deaths and injuries), which is the largest number of civilian casualties in a single day since data collection started in 2009.** [emphasis added]*

*(DFAT Afghanistan) 2.33 The security situation is better in areas where government forces maintain strong control, such as major urban areas like Kabul, **but attacks remain a common occurrence even in these areas** (see also the 18 September 2015 DFAT Thematic Report on Conditions in Kabul). [emphasis added]*

The key statement that opens DFAT Afghanistan point 2.35 has already been noted:

Insurgents regularly conduct high-profile attacks in many parts of Afghanistan, including Kabul.

The DFAT Thematic Report on Conditions in Kabul, published concurrently with the general Country Information report, adds significant detail. Note:

*(DFAT Kabul) 2.7 Kabul remains one of the poorest cities in the world and **regularly experiences serious security incidents.** [emphasis added]*

*(DFAT Kabul) 3.1 While **high-profile attacks, including those that target civilians, are common in Kabul, . . . such attacks still occur frequently.** The risk faced by different individuals varies greatly. People associated with the government or the*

international community are at a significantly higher risk than ordinary Afghans in Kabul.
[emphasis added]

(DFAT Kabul) 3.2 *The Afghan National Police (ANP) has primary responsibility for law and order in Kabul, and plays an active role in fighting insurgent groups. Policing in Kabul tends to be more effective than in most other urban and rural areas, but **the ANP's capacity to maintain law and order is limited** by a lack of resources, poor training, insufficient and outmoded equipment and corruption.* [emphasis added]

Reading this report as a whole, it is not easy to square the frequent confident generalizations about effective security control in Kabul with the statements quoted above and all the carefully worded qualifications. The use of comparisons (“better in areas where government forces maintain strong control”, “a significantly higher risk than ordinary Afghans”, “tends to be more effective than in most other urban and rural areas”, “relatively safety”) does not invalidate the reality of absolute danger. The basis for comparison is a situation of very significant danger and minimal control and protection as documented below. The statement about the police (DFAT Kabul 3.2) quoted above essentially means the ANP are not really effective, even in Kabul, but it is obfuscated by comparisons and rationalizations.

Vulnerability of Hazaras

These reports represent a shift in DFAT's position in relation to the vulnerability of Hazaras to focused violence in Afghanistan. The trend simply had to be acknowledged. Certainly there are studied attempts to downplay the dangers facing Hazaras. For example DFAT Afghanistan point 3.5 states that “*DFAT assesses that, in the current environment, all ethnic groups are subject to a high risk of violence from anti-government elements, but no particular group is systematically targeted solely on the basis of ethnicity*”. The words “*systematically*” and “*solely*” are fudge factors which render the statement almost meaningless; certainly impossible to analyse or negate.

In such a chaotic environment nothing is systematic. Instead of “*systematically*” (repeated twice more in the report), it would be just as reasonable to choose qualifiers such as “*sporadically*” or “*frequently*” — and then the assertion would have to be different.

No-one can know with certainty the exact motivation for violent actions. It is most likely that multiple factors operate, each factor having its own significance. “*Solely*” can never be disproved and it is meaningless in a context of multiple and complex factors. This also applies to the use of “*alone*” in point 3.14 (where in fact disproportionate targeting of Hazaras is admitted in relation to kidnappings). Furthermore, at point 3.26 the report specifically supports my contention about multiple factors: “. . . *In many cases of violence against minority Shia groups it is not possible to differentiate between religion, ethnicity (Shias in Afghanistan are predominantly ethnic Hazaras), and opportunism as the motivation for the attacks*”.

At any rate the point cited initially (3.5) continues “*Although ethnicity or religion may sometimes be a contributing factor, especially in kidnappings of civilians travelling by road, . . .*” This is a significant admission, reinforced in point 3.26: “*DFAT assesses that Sunni-Shia sectarian violence is infrequent, although occasional violence does occur*”. A similar statement is made in point 3.38: “*While ethnicity and religion are unlikely to be primary motivations for attacks on government workers, in some cases these issues may be contributing factors*”. In this case it must be noted that “*primary motivation*” is another fudge factor: secondary motivations are not insignificant, and

there is no way of proving which factors are primary and which are secondary in most of these situations.

Compared with the national report, the DFAT Thematic Report on Conditions in Kabul, 18 September 2015, seems to give a slightly more definitive assessment of the dangers facing Hazaras in Afghanistan. Note for example DFAT Kabul point 3.9: *Travelling to Kabul from other parts of Afghanistan—particularly the Hazarajat—by road can be dangerous. Kidnappings are common, driven by financial considerations (i.e. ransom demands) and tribal disputes. While all ethnic groups are vulnerable to kidnappings, **DFAT assesses that Hazaras face a risk that is greater than that for other ethnic groups. It is unclear whether this is due to ethnic targeting or a result of the high numbers of Hazaras travelling on this route. Nonetheless, DFAT assesses that, if a bus with a mixture of ethnic groups on board is stopped in these areas, ethnic Hazaras (and other non-Pashtuns) are more likely to be selected for kidnapping or violence than Pashtun passengers.*** [emphasis added]

This is consistent with a number of recent Australian DIBP International Treaties Obligations Assessments which concede that, due to the danger on the roads, the Hazara claimants cannot be expected to locate safely in their provincial home areas, leaving Kabul as the only possible alternative. This is the point at which DFAT draws the line:

(DFAT Kabul) 3.11 *DFAT assesses that, notwithstanding road safety concerns and the security situation in Kabul, there are generally options available for members of most ethnic and religious minorities to relocate from other parts of Afghanistan to relative safety in Kabul. This relocation is more likely to be successful where the individual travels as part of a larger group, or has established networks that can assist with the provision of basic necessities.*

As pointed out in my September 2015 update, this assessment flies in the face of almost all other analyses of the situation. Furthermore, the use of the qualifiers “generally” and “most” and the comparative indicators “relative” (in relation to safety) and “more likely” in relation to “successful” relocation can only represent an attempt to down play the reality. Reading between the lines there are hints that indeed the Kabul option may be far from suitable: “generally” and “most” point to exceptions, and the “more likely” statement could just as well be stated as “this relocation is **less likely** to be successful when the individual travels alone or has no established networks” (which is always the case with returned asylum seekers). Most importantly the term “relative safety” is practically meaningless: **the basis for comparison is a situation of very significant danger and the description certainly does not preclude the reality of absolute danger. It would be more accurate to describe the situation facing Hazaras in Kabul in terms of danger rather than safety: danger that may be slightly less pronounced than the danger existing in the provinces, rather than “relative safety”.**

The point about supportive networks is stated more clearly at DFAT Afghanistan point 5.20:

*While men of working age are more likely to be able to return and reintegrate successfully than unaccompanied women and children, **the lack of family networks for single men can also impact on their ability to reintegrate into Afghan community.*** [emphasis added]

2. Other recent reports related to the security situation in Kabul

Since publication of the new DFAT reports in September (and my September 2015 update on the plight of Hazaras in Afghanistan) there have been further reports documenting the deteriorating security situation in Kabul.

- It is also noteworthy that the 15 December DFAT travel advice for Afghanistan⁶ is much less equivocal than the DFAT Country Information Report Afghanistan 18 September 2015 and the DFAT Thematic Report on Conditions in Kabul 18 September 2015, discussed above. This travel advice refers to the security situation in the following terms:

Serious large-scale terrorist incidents, including suicide bombings and attacks using vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices, occur regularly throughout Afghanistan. The frequency of attacks in Kabul, including in the most heavily fortified areas of the capital, has increased significantly in 2015 and further attacks are expected. There are credible reports of an imminent attack in Kabul city.

.....

Attacks can occur anywhere, anytime, particularly in Kabul, and the southern and eastern provinces.

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Attacks on roads in Kabul: We continue to receive a stream of credible reporting indicating that terrorists are planning attacks on vehicles travelling along roads in and around Kabul.

These statements effectively override any previous DFAT suggestions that there may be effective security control in Kabul.

- Especially stunning was the revelation in the New York Times⁷ that US Embassy staff now travel by helicopter between the airport and the embassy complex because of danger on the 1.5 km route. Alissa J. Rubin reports “*the deafening intrusion of low-flying American helicopters in the Afghan capital, . . . packs of them now, coming two, four, six at a time, starting around 7 a.m., then again at midday and at dusk*”.

“The American Embassy’s not allowed to move by road anymore.”

“After 14 years of war, of training the Afghan Army and the police, it has become too dangerous to drive the mile and a half from the airport to the embassy.”

“Maybe that is just the Americans’ “force protection” mentality. The Americans always present an obvious target with their Humvees and heavily armored S.U.V.s. But if everyone now has to move in helicopters, then nobody can get out of the embassy to meet Afghans or go to dinner even with the Westerners in town — no one else has a compound with a landing pad.”

“But the helicopter transport is just one measure of how things have changed in the Afghan capital since 2014, and the end of the huge NATO combat mission.”

“The last performance sponsored by the French Cultural Institute, in the past the main center for concerts of classical Afghan music, was attacked by a suicide bomber. The detonation occurred in the middle of a musical and theatrical performance in December, killing one person and wounding more than a dozen.”

“It was not just the expatriates leaving; the Afghans were going, too, and in droves.”

- In a related report,⁸ Brian Terrell, a co-coordinator for Voices for Creative Nonviolence, an organisation committed to supporting a peaceful future for Afghanistan, expressed his despair.

“We have no helicopters or landing pads, but the security situation in Kabul is also a

⁶ <https://smartraveller.gov.au/countries/afghanistan>

⁷ “Life Pulls Back in Afghan Capital, as Danger Rises and Troops Recede”, Alissa J. Rubin, 3 November 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/04/world/asia/life-pulls-back-in-afghan-capital-as-danger-rises-and-troops-recede.html>

⁸ “Life Under Helicopters: Dispatch From Kabul”, Brian Terrell, 11 November 2015, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/11/11/life-under-helicopters-dispatch-from-kabul/>

concern for Voices for Creative Nonviolence, . . . ”

Terrell makes the point that western governments such as that of Germany maintain denial of the dangers of Kabul in order to justify forced deportation of asylum seekers:

“The security in Kabul does not look so grim to everyone, though. According to an October 29 Newsweek report, the German government will soon deport most of the Afghan asylum seekers who have entered that country. German interior minister Thomas de Maiziere insists that Afghans should “stay in their country” and that those refugees coming from Kabul especially have no claim for asylum, because Kabul is “considered to be a safe area.” The streets of Kabul that are too dangerous for US Embassy workers to travel in their convoys of Humvees and armored cars escorted by heavily armed private contractors are safe for Afghans to live, work and raise their families, in Herr de Maiziere’s estimation.”

“It was heart breaking, then, to hear these brilliant, resourceful and creative young people who clearly represent Afghanistan’s best hope for the future, discuss frankly whether they have a future there at all and whether they should join so many other Afghans seeking sanctuary elsewhere.”

“The reasons that any of these young people might leave are many and impelling. There is great fear of suicide bombings in Kabul, . . . ”

- A recent incident involving the beheading of 7 Hazaras has brought the threat of ISIS to national, if not global, attention by way of a huge protest march in Kabul.

Note:

- ***Afghan Fighters Loyal to ISIS Beheaded 7 Hostages, Officials Say***⁹
- ***Protesters angry about ISIS beheadings storm Afghan presidential palace***¹⁰

Such a high profile incident, consistent with the well-known incidents cited in earlier updates, engenders profound fear among all the Hazaras of Afghanistan. It makes them believe that they certainly face increased risk of serious harm on account of the entry of Daesh operatives. The risk of a Hazara suffering serious harm from or because of this group can no longer be regarded as “remote”. It is precisely the “infidels”, in Afghanistan, almost exclusively Shia Muslims, who are targeted by Daesh, a fundamentalist extremist Sunni organisation.

- The recent large scale protests and demonstrations in Kabul¹¹ have been organised and supported by Hazara people taking considerable risks to demand government protection against the escalating violence targeted at them.
- Commentators have uniformly interpreted these and related events as signalling the likelihood of further targeted violence against Hazaras. Note the following:

a. Hazara take protests to Kabul as Afghan sectarian fears rise,¹² Reuters, 10 Nov 2015

*The killing of the seven Hazara, including three women and two children, during fighting between rival Taliban factions and Islamic State sympathizers, highlighted the risk of **worsening sectarianism amid daily violence sweeping Afghanistan**.*
[emphasis added]

⁹ http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/10/world/asia/afghan-fighters-loyal-to-isis-beheaded-7-hostages-officials-say.html?_r=0, Mujib Mashal and Taimoor Shah, 9 November 2015,

¹⁰ <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/11/11/asia/afghanistan-unrest/index.html>, Masoud Popalzai and Greg Botelho, CNN, 12 November 2015,

¹¹ <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/11/11/asia/afghanistan-unrest/index.html>, Masoud Popalzai and Greg Botelho, CNN, 12 November 2015,

¹² <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban-idUSKCN0SZ19420151110>

.....
This year, a series of kidnappings and murders of Hazara fuelled fears that the group was being deliberately targeted, and the latest killings in the southern province of Zabul triggered a furious wave of reaction on social media. [emphasis added]

Tuesday's protest convoy underlined the anger among Hazara and followed a march by some 2,000 people in Ghazni, a city in central Afghanistan with a large Hazara community, where the bodies were first taken from Zabul.

Bearing the coffins of the dead aloft and chanting slogans against the Taliban, Islamic State and the government in Kabul, the crowd demanded punishment for the killers.

*"We ask the government to find the reason behind this **serial killing of Hazaras in Afghanistan** and bring the perpetrators to justice," Ghulam Ali, a protester, said. [emphasis added]*

b. Afghan President Urges Unity After Protest Over Beheadings Turns Violent,¹³ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, with reporting by AFP, Reuters, AP, and the BBC, 11 November 2015

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has issued a call for unity after violence marred a protest in the capital over the beheadings of seven ethnic Hazaras, possibly by Islamist extremists.

The televised appeal came shortly after security forces fired warning shots into the air to drive back protesters trying to climb the walls of the Presidential Palace, where thousands of marchers were expressing anger over the brutal killings.

.....
***There has been an upsurge in violence this year against the Afghan Hazara community, which is predominantly Shi'ite, including a series of kidnappings and killings.** [emphasis added]*

c. Hunted Hazaras travel 'Death Road' through Afghanistan,¹⁴ AFP, 5 December 2015

*West of the Afghan city of Maidan Shahr is a 40-kilometre stretch of paved highway known as "Death Road", where **drivers say the country's ethnic Hazara minority are slaughtered by militants "like sheep and cows"**. [emphasis added]*

.....
For many, "Death Road" is a symbol of the persecution they have faced for decades.

A recent string of beheadings and kidnappings amid fears over a resurgent Taliban and the rise of the Islamic State group saw thousands turn out in Kabul early this month in protests — a sight not seen in the capital for many years.

.....
***"Insecurity has become like a terrible nightmare for Hazaras. They can't leave their homelands, and if they do, they risk being beheaded by these extremists on the roads,"** Aziz Royesh, a Hazara rights activists and one of the organisers of the protest says. [emphasis added]*

.....
The protests which swept Kabul on November 11 appeared to catch authorities off guard and highlighted increasing fury at the Hazaras' sense they have been left unprotected by the government.

.....
But the Taliban have surged again in recent months, stoking fears of more sectarian violence compounded by the Islamic State group's attempts to gain a foothold in

¹³ <http://www.rferl.org/content/afghanistan-taliban-beheadings-hazara/27357421.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-3347011/Hunted-Hazaras-travel-Death-Road-Afghanistan.html>; Joseph Goldstein reported from Kabul, Afghanistan, and Taimoor Shah from Kandahar, Afghanistan.

Afghanistan.

.....

"For the past 14 years, we have been helping the government, and using civil ways to make our demands," Royesh, the protest organiser, says.

"It appears though that this approach is not that responsive or productive in the Afghan context... Seeing this, Hazaras who have increasingly been victimised rose up."

d. Afghan Killings Highlight Risks to Ethnic Hazaras,¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, 13 November 2015

In a year of alarming civilian casualties, it takes a lot to bring protesters out in sufficient numbers and bring the Afghan capital to a standstill. But that's exactly what happened November 11, when thousands of Afghans took to the streets of Kabul to express outrage at another in a series of ethnic killings.

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Security in most parts of Afghanistan has deteriorated in 2015, and violence against civilians has worsened. *Splintering within the Taliban has given rise to rival factions competing for power. [emphasis added]*

.....

While all civilians are at risk in areas of conflict in Afghanistan, the Zabul slayings highlight the particular dangers Hazaras face. In a number of incidents in the last two years, Hazara bus passengers have been separated from other passengers, abducted and, in some cases, killed. [emphasis added]

e. Suicide bomb in Afghan capital targets journalists, kills seven people¹⁶, Reuters, 20 January 2016

A Taliban suicide car bomber targeted a minibus carrying journalists working for a private Afghan television channel on Wednesday, killing seven employees during evening rush hour close to the national parliament in Kabul, officials said. It was the latest in a series of suicide attacks in the Afghan capital that coincide with renewed efforts to revive a peace process with Taliban insurgents that broke down in July.

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At least 25 people were wounded in the bombing, including women and children, police officials said. The attack took place near the Russian Embassy in west Kabul. The explosion sent smoke billowing into the sky and was powerful enough to be heard miles away.

Kabul has seen at least six bomb attacks since the new year. *On Sunday, a rocket landed near the Italian embassy in Kabul, wounding two security guards. [emphasis added]*

.....

Separately on Wednesday, the U.S. government issued a warning that it had received reports militants were planning to attack a hotel or guesthouse frequented by foreigners in Kabul.

f. Afghanistan attack: Kabul suicide bomber kills 20¹⁷, BBC News, 1 February 2016

A suicide bomber has killed 20 people at a police headquarters in the Afghan capital Kabul, officials say.

At least 29 others were wounded in the blast in the west of the city, the interior ministry said.

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The Taliban said they carried out the bombing - one of a string of attacks in Kabul and

¹⁵ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/11/13/dispatches-afghan-killings-highlight-risks-ethnic-hazaras>, report by Ahmad Shuja,

¹⁶ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-blast-kabul-idUSKCN0UY1HU>; Mirwais Harooni and Andrew Macaskill, editing by Ruth Pitchford and Katharine Houreld

¹⁷ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35459074>

elsewhere in recent months.

Monday's attack happened at the entrance of the headquarters of the National Civil Order Police, a unit that has a counterinsurgency role against the Taliban.

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A spokesman for Nato-led forces in Afghanistan, Brig Gen Wilson Shoffner, said: "This attack on the Afghan police shows the contempt the Taliban have for the rule of law in Afghanistan and for those who commit themselves daily to defending the Afghan people.

.....

The bombing follows a spate of attacks in January, one of which killed seven staff from the Tolo media group in Kabul. Several other attacks were near foreign diplomatic missions.

3. Escalation of violence throughout Afghanistan: other key reports

- a. A crucial report¹⁸ on the Taliban insurgency was published by the New York Times in October 2015, authored by Afghanistan experts Rod Nordland and Joseph Goldstein. Called "**Afghan Taliban's Reach Is Widest Since 2001, U.N. Says**", the report draws on unpublished data compiled by the United Nations as well as interviews with numerous local officials in areas under threat. **It calls into question the assessment of the commander of the international coalition that the Afghan security forces are "still holding" and "the Afghan government retains control of Kabul, of Highway One, its provincial capitals and nearly all of the district centers"**.

Key quotes:

... the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan over the past two weeks has evacuated four of its 13 provincial offices around the country — the most it has ever done for security reasons — according to local officials in the affected areas.

.....

Afghan officials in many districts currently under attack by the Taliban depict a significantly different situation. Even Highway One, a ring road connecting all of Afghanistan's main cities, has long suffered repeated Taliban ambushes and roadblocks in southern Afghanistan; over the past two weeks the insurgents repeatedly cut the highway in the Doshi and Baghlani Jadid districts of Baghlan Province — long an uncontested government stronghold. Few government officials now use the highway along much of its route. [emphasis added]

In many districts that are nominally under government control, like Musa Qala in Helmand Province and Charchino in Oruzgan Province, government forces hold only the government buildings in the district center and are under constant siege by the insurgents. [emphasis added]

.....

More than half of the districts in Afghanistan are rated by the United Nations as having either a substantial, high or extreme level of risk. [emphasis added]

"We do not have any way to escape," said Wali Dad, the police chief in Charchino, where 400 police officers have been surrounded and pinned down for months. "If we get any means of escaping, I will not stay for a second in the district. The government is failing in their governing, and it's better to let the Taliban rule."

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The United Nations data suggests that the tempo of the insurgency has increased in many parts of the country where there had been little Taliban

¹⁸ http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/12/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-united-nations.html?smid=tw-nytimesworld&smtyp=cur&_r=2. Reporting was contributed by Taimoor Shah from Kandahar, Afghanistan; Alissa J. Rubin, Ahmad Shakib and Mujib Mashal from Kabul; and Najim Rahim from Kunduz, Afghanistan.

presence in the past, including some areas in the north with scant Pashtun populations. The Taliban have been a largely Pashtun-based insurgency and have been historically strongest in Pashtun-majority areas in southern and eastern Afghanistan, with some pockets in the north, such as Kunduz. [emphasis added]

.....
The Taliban took the northern city of Kunduz on Monday after a year of advancing toward the area. It is the first major city to fall to their control since 2001, but the insurgents continue to attack other areas throughout rural Afghanistan.

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The United Nations security threat rating system is also used by aid groups to guide their assessment of whether they can operate safely in provincial areas.

"It's much more difficult to access many areas in the north than before for aid agencies," said Fiona Gall, director of Acbar, an umbrella group representing nongovernmental organizations in Afghanistan. **"It's a general degradation. It is very difficult to combat it in this environment."** [emphasis added]

The United Nations mission data showed that it considered about half of Afghanistan's districts to have a threat level considered high or extreme. United Nations personnel would not normally be allowed to travel to or through any district with a threat level that high. Districts with extreme threat levels either have no government presence at all, or a government presence reduced to only the district capital; there were 38 such districts scattered through 14 of the country's 34 provinces.

In all, 27 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces had some districts where the threat level was rated high or extreme.

- b. A more recent and much longer (240 pages) and more extensively documented report **"European Asylum Support Office (EASO) Country of Origin Information Report Afghanistan Security Situation Update, January 2016"**¹⁹ reaches similar conclusions. "The report provides a comprehensive overview of the security situation in Afghanistan, and provides information relevant for the protection status determination of Afghan asylum seekers. Amongst other things, the report reveals that armed insurgent groups, such as the Taliban and Hezb-e Islami Afghanistan, have increasingly conducted large scale attacks on the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The insurgents have been increasingly successful in conquering and holding territory, but the ANSF generally still manage to control large city centres and towns in most of the country."²⁰

On page 22 the report notes that "according to the UN, during the summer of 2015, the [armed] conflict grew in intensity and geographical scope, with a spike in high-profile attacks in Kabul", and that "in July 2015, USAID reported that security conditions had worsened across Afghanistan due to increased Taliban attacks and renewed fighting".

"According to research done by the Long War Journal, the Taliban have full control of 29 districts and are contesting 36 others in all regions of Afghanistan. Thomas Ruttig, Director of the Afghanistan Analysts Network was more conservative about the number of districts and reported 17 under full Taliban control."

This report leaves no room for argument in relation to the dire conditions prevailing in Kabul. It emphasises the deterioration of the situation in terms of both security and economics:

(EASO COI Report Afghanistan, page 28) An Afghan journalist based in Kabul reported that economic conditions were different than a few years ago. He explained the current situation for people in Afghanistan as: a combination of security and economic concerns.

¹⁹ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/asylum/european-asylum-support-office/bz3012564enc_complet_en.pdf

²⁰ <https://easo.europa.eu/wp-content/uploads/Press-release-Afghanistan-security-situation.pdf>

*Economy has taken a huge tumble and there are not many prospects. There are fewer foreign companies and NGOs, the foreign troops that left also used to provide employment. Investors do not feel safe investing, because of the security situation. People from Wardak, Kandahar or other provinces used to come to Kabul and had a chance of building up a life here. They could find a job or education. Now this is not possible anymore. For young kids it is difficult because **it costs a lot of money to come to live in Kabul.** [emphasis added]*

***Many people, even those who used to have well-paid jobs, have been out of work for at least a year now.** [emphasis added]*

*Now, you also see that at the passport office in the west of Kabul, there are hundreds of people lined up looking for a passport. **Everyone is desperately trying to get out.** [emphasis added]*

Several of these findings are confirmed by a 2015 Government report (with UN Habitat support) on the state of Afghan cities. The report mentioned insecurity as a structural issue undermining the business atmosphere and confidence.

*The report further confirms that for a majority of Afghan households it is very difficult to obtain a house in the formal housing sector. It is reported that lack of employment opportunities in the cities are causing youngsters to leave the country and that **the worsening economic situation is to be seen in combination with a worsening security situation.** [emphasis added]*

.....
Regarding daily life in Kabul, the same Afghan journalist explained: People have limited their movements and they do so especially after a bombing. For a few days or weeks people try avoiding going out too much, but at the end of the day you have to come out, you will have to go to the market. From now, we do not feel safe even at home anymore. We feel like there could be a bomb or incident at any time that happens in a residential area.

.....
From 1 January to 13 September 2015, Kabul city saw 217 security incidents, including 68 explosions (roughly two thirds IEDs and one-third suicide attacks). There were between one and four suicide attacks every month from January to July, and six in August.

.....
Organisations monitoring the security situation in Kabul noticed a spike in insurgent attacks in the city in October 2014 and again in May 2015 and August 2015.

4. Summary and conclusions

As indicated at the beginning, all of the reports and analyses of the past six months point to further escalation of dangers facing the Afghanistan population in general and Hazaras in particular. The descriptions of the current reality are very important in themselves, but perhaps more significant are the alarming trends. All the expert observers predict grave deterioration in security for the immediate and medium term future. There are many converging signs and factors.

Above all, the Taliban is expanding its area of control and influence and is now operating with increasing audacity in Kabul. The Taliban's historic and reaffirmed hatred of Hazaras will not go away. The Hazara enclaves will be easy targets.

In particular Hazaras will face escalating dangers and economic challenges as the Taliban and other Sunni extremist groups gain ground and sense the opportunity to persecute their historic enemies without fear of reprisal or loss of popular support. It is no longer tenable to give any weight to the suggestion that there are some situations where Hazaras may not be in danger of being targeted for reasons of their ethnicity and religious preference. Any protection some Hazaras may have been able

to count on from the wealthy, powerful forces that once employed them, has now evaporated and this group find themselves again the target of a resurgent Taliban. Other Hazaras, especially those who have sought asylum in other countries, are now deemed to be guilty by association. Indeed, as long ago as March 2013 the director of the Afghan NGO Safety Office indicated that Hazaras were being targeted by the Taliban because it was believed they were western agents²¹. There is now more reason than ever to accept that view.

The stream of “anticipatory refugees”, that has ebbed and flowed over the past two decades, is becoming a groundswell once again as Afghans with the means to do so are seeking ways to flee the country. Precisely because Hazaras in Afghanistan face an increasingly bleak future, there should be absolutely no thought of refoulement of any Hazaras who are seeking asylum in other countries at this point in history.

Kabul, previously assessed by some as a potentially viable option for relocation of endangered Hazaras, can no longer be considered a realistic safe haven under any circumstances. Certainly anyone without established support networks would be extremely exposed to danger and destitution. Previous suggestions that the size and diversity of Kabul would somehow provide a measure of protection are now impossible to defend. Violence and bombings are a daily fact of life in Kabul and targeting of particular groups is an ever-present possibility. There can be no comfort in the DFAT assessment (DFAT Afghanistan 5:21) *“that returnees from western countries are not specifically targeted on the basis of their being failed asylum-seekers”*. Not only would “being failed asylum seekers” represent an increasingly significant factor as the Taliban gain influence, but other factors such as religion and ethnicity are increasingly important contributors to the escalating danger.

²¹ http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2014/oct/07/afghan-hazara-asylum-seekers-forcibly-deported-australia?CMP=twg_gu