

AFGHANISTAN'S SHIAS

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KABUL, Afghanistan—As Afghanistan's political factions inch toward an interim administration, no group is more anxious about the outcome than Afghanistan's Shia minority. Descendants of one of Islam's two major branches—the other is the Sunni—Shiites constitute 15% of Afghanistan's population. Little noted by the rest of the world, Shiites have been the victims of extensive pogroms by the Taliban, extremists from the hard-line Deobandi school of Sunni Islam who believe Shias are not Muslims. Since 1998, Osama bin Laden and the Pakistanis who fight for the Taliban—also strongly anti-Shia—have urged Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar to throw the Shias out of Afghanistan.

Now, with the Taliban in retreat and the various Afghan factions meeting in Bonn to try and shape the country's political future, Shia leaders are trying to raise international awareness of their plight and get a hearing for their concerns. Already, they fear they are underrepresented by the 11-man delegation of the Northern Alliance, the biggest of the four major anti-Taliban factions negotiating at the United Nations-sponsored talks in Bonn.

"The U.N. talks about the fair treatment of tribes, but itself commits an oppression," Karim Khalili, who leads one of Afghanistan's two major Shia factions, told Reuters Friday. Afghanistan's Shiites have reason for concern: Since 1998, the Taliban regime has persecuted their community, killing thousands and chasing many more into neighbors Iran and Pakistan. In January, to cite only one atrocity, Taliban forces spent three days rounding up and killing Shiites of the central Hazarajat region. U.N. officials said some were locked in a mosque and burned to death; others were lined up against the wall of the Oxfam office and executed.

"People abroad should remember this," says Gen. Syed Hussain Anwari, who heads the other major Shia faction and is the main Shia representative at the Bonn conference. "If we had not resisted the Taliban they would have gone all the way up to Central Asia, and the international community would have suffered huge consequences."

Afghanistan's Shia faction is composed mainly of ethnic Hazaras, though there are small Shia minorities within every other major ethnic group—the Pashtuns, Uzbeks and Tajiks. But the Shia community is politically fractious; Messrs. Khalili and Anwari compete for influence within it. The largest Shia group is the Hizb-e-Wahadat, which itself is divided into two factions and draws its support almost entirely from the Hazaris. Both Wahadat factions support the Northern Alliance. The first, led by Mr. Khalili, liberated the Hazarajat region. The second, led by Ustad Mohammed Muhaqiq, is based in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, and helped liberate the city in mid-November. Mr. Muhaqiq is now one of the three power brokers in Mazar; the other two are Uzbek Gen. Rashid Dostum and Tajik Gen. Mohammed Atta.

Unlike the largely Hazari Wahadat, Gen. Anwari's Harakat is much more representative of the entire Shia community across Afghanistan. His moderate views, his push for a broad-based government and his inclination toward greater democracy and autonomy for ethnic minorities has made his small party much more multiethnic, attracting Shia fighters and intellectuals from as far afield as Jalalabad in the Pashtun east to Herat in the west.

The Shia community is also divided over whether Afghanistan should accept foreign peacekeepers. Mr. Khalili says foreign troops are essential if the Shias are to be protected. But Gen. Anwari fears that any intervention outside of humanitarian assistance would invite Afghanistan's often meddling neighbors back in to the country.

"What we really fear is a repeat of the past, with Afghanistan's neighbors once again plunging in to try and support their proxies in Afghanistan," he says. "These foreigners never respect the

rights of the minorities. We have experienced so much foreign intervention-first the Soviets, then the Pakistanis and then the Arabs-so how can we trust the idea of a foreign security force now?"

To be sure, Shiites themselves have benefited from foreign intervention IN AFGHANISTAN? Iran-which has the world's only Shia state and views itself as a protector of Shiites world-wide-has financed the efforts of Shia groups in many countries to resist the majority Sunni sect. Many of these groups, most notably Lebanon's Hezbollah, have carried out terrorist attacks against innocent civilians.

Lakhdar Brahimi, the U.N.'s special envoy to the Bonn talks, promises that any interim government or constitution will reflect the interests of Afghanistan's Shiites and protect them from Islamic zealots. The Brahimi plan submitted to the U.N. Security Council before the Bonn talks began devotes a section to the protection of Afghan Shias.

But it will take more than words to reassure Afghanistan's Shiites. While the Northern Alliance's massacre of 600 Taliban and al Qaeda prisoners last week in Mazar was regrettable, says Gen. Anwari, they "pale in significance with the atrocities that the Taliban and the Arab and Pakistani militants committed during their seven years in power, particularly against the Shia community.