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22<sup>nd</sup> Aug 2021

cc: Hon Kristopher John Faafoi MP  
Minister of Immigration of New Zealand  
[k.faafoi@ministers.govt.nz](mailto:k.faafoi@ministers.govt.nz)

Dear Rt. Hon Jacinda Ardern,

**Re: Urgent Request for Evacuation of Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan**

We are seeking your urgent intervention to rescue and protect religious minorities, including Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan, who face religious persecution and an immediate threat to their lives since the Taliban took over Afghanistan.

We have chosen to write to you because of your reputation and track record for swinging into action where only eagles dare, an attribute admired by all.

At a time when countries have closed their borders due to Covid 19, evacuation is the only hope for about 280 Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan who are now seeking refuge in the Karte Parvaan Gurdwara (Sikh place of congregational prayer) in Kabul, after fleeing from their homes with their sacred scriptures, before the Taliban seized the cities of Jalalabad and Ghazni. We are in contact with them and they are ready to be evacuated.

The UK and Canadian government have announced that they will be resettling vulnerable Afghans in their country, in due course. We are aware that the Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) C-130 Hercules aircraft flew out of RNZAF Base Auckland on a mercy mission to evacuate nationals and others from Afghanistan. We request New Zealand to show the way by evacuating religious minorities immediately. Along with other countries New Zealand can resettle some of the Afghan Sikhs and Hindus on our shores. The NZ Sikh and Hindu community is ready to facilitate any logistical and settlement bridging.

We urge the New Zealand Government to urgently undertake the following:

1. Due to the real risk to the lives of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus, execute a specific plan, assisted by the United Nations Assistance Mission on Afghanistan (UNAMA), to immediately evacuate them and in due course protect their places of worship, which are of historic significance. If these historical Gurdwaras are not protected, it will result in the complete ethnic cleansing of the Sikh community that has been in Afghanistan for more than 500 years. The safeguarding and maintenance of these historic shrines must be

done in consultation with the Sikh and Hindu communities of Afghanistan.

2. Secure the proportionate relocation of Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan as protected persons in New Zealand on humanitarian grounds.

The NZ Sikh and Hindu communities reiterate the offer for sponsoring Afghan refugees that was made in a proposal dated 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020, to the then Immigration Minister, to ensure the evacuees will not be a financial burden on the State (see proposal attached). This offer has been reiterated on behalf of the Sikh and Hindu community by former MP, Kanwaljit Singh Bakshi, in his letter to you on 18<sup>th</sup> Aug 2021 (attached). Your leadership during the Christchurch massacre shows you will deliver during the Afghanistan evacuation crisis too. A quick Zoom meeting can be facilitated should there be any questions or information required to address this immediately.

The Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan need immediate protection and relocation to a safe country like New Zealand because there is no hope for their safety and security in Afghanistan, as evidenced by the treatment of religious minorities at the height of the Taliban insurgency in the 90s. More recently, Sikhs and Hindus have not been safe since the 25<sup>th</sup> March 2020 attack on the congregation of a Sikh Gurdwara in Kabul, whose details are as follows:

1. During the Kabul Gurdwara attack on 25<sup>th</sup> March 2020, the assailants vowed to exterminate Sikhs if they don't leave Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup>
2. Three of the attackers escaped despite a heavy presence of Afghan security forces.
3. There were multiple explosions on 26<sup>th</sup> March 2020 on the route to the crematorium where Sikhs were conducting the funeral rites of their loved ones.
4. On 27<sup>th</sup> March 2020, explosive mines were found by Afghan Police near the Gurdwara Karte Parvaan in Kabul, which is now the refuge for Sikhs evacuated from the Gurdwara that was attacked.
5. Sikhs in Afghanistan have taken refuge in Gurdwaras since the Afghan Civil War in the 90s. However, the recent attack on the Gurdwara in Kabul has shown that the Gurdwaras are no longer a safe place for Sikhs.
6. The attack at the Kabul Gurdwara took place despite assurances from the Afghan Government that safety and security will be provided to Sikhs and Hindus and their temples and Gurdwaras, following a targeted brutal attack in July 2018 when Sikh leaders were killed whilst waiting to meet President in Jalalabad. The recent attack shows that the Afghan Government has failed to provide and cannot provide basic safety and security for the Sikh and Hindu communities and their Gurdwaras and temples in Afghanistan.

## ABOUT US

**The Supreme Sikh Society of New Zealand**, which has admirably served the Sikh Gurdwaras and NGOs in New Zealand since 2003, recently received the 'Winner of the inaugural Kiwi-Indian Community Organisation of the Year Award'. **UNITED SIKHS** is a UN associated international advocacy and humanitarian NGO that is registered in 10 countries and has advocated for religious minorities for twenty years. **UNITED SIKHS** has collaborated with the **Gurdwara Guru Nanak Darbar**, of London, UK, that serves the largest Afghan Sikh congregation in the world, for the protection and relocation of Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan. In 2018, we highlighted the plight of Afghan Sikh and Hindus at the 39<sup>th</sup> session of the UN Human Rights Council and at the pre-session of Universal Periodic review (UPR) on Afghanistan in 2019, following a dastardly terrorist attack in Jalalabad that killed 12 Sikh leaders and one Hindu.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sikh24.com/2020/03/28/afghan-sikhs-asked-to-quit-afghanistan-within-10-days-or-get-ready-to-be-killed/#.XoBuYSXTWEc>

<sup>2</sup> <https://adobe.ly/2yFHhVy>

## **BACKGROUND ON SIKHS AND HINDUS IN AFGHANISTAN**

The Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan are persecuted minorities that have been subjected to ethnic cleansing for many years. In the early 1990s there were more than 200,000 Sikhs and Hindus spread across Afghanistan, but as a result of over 30 years of unabated threats, kidnappings and attacks, the community has been reduced to under 150 families.

### **1. HISTORY**

Afghanistan, which has been described as a land of "rocks, sands, deserts, ice and snow", once had hundreds of thousands of Sikhs and Hindus who lived as thriving business people in every corner of Afghanistan and controlled most of the trade. Sikhs lived there since the founder of the Sikh religion, Guru Nanak Sahib, visited Afghanistan, more than 500 years ago.

1. The Soviet intervention of 1979 and the Civil War of 1992 saw their mass exodus to neighbouring India, Iran and to a lesser extent, the West. Khajinder Singh, the late author of 'Sikhs of Kabul' (2001), says that in 1992 there were about 60,000 Sikhs in Afghanistan. Today, no more than 2000 Sikhs and a few Hindus, constituting under 0.3% of the population, remain.
2. These people remain in Afghanistan because they did not have the resources to leave and/or they felt duty-bound to stay and protect the 65 historical Sikh Gurdwaras (place of worship) and 27 Hindu temples from the Taliban.

### **2. SAFETY AND SECURITY**

- 2.1 In 2003, NATO took the lead of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. Mandated by the United Nations, ISAF's primary objective was to ensure Afghanistan would never again become a safe haven for terrorists. At the end of 2014, the ISAF mission ended.
- 2.2 The 1st July 2018 suicide bombing killed 13 community leaders of non-Muslim minorities and reignited a climate of desperation and terror. On 11 August, more than 1,000 Taliban fighters stormed Ghazni leaving an estimated 250 civilians dead. This was followed by another apparently targeted suicide bombing on 15 August at an education centre in Kabul, which left 48 people dead and 67 injured.
- 2.3 These events demonstrate a very recent and sudden escalation of violence and terror fueled by religious ideology and inflicted mainly upon the non-Muslim minority.

### **3. RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

- 3.1 Although the instability in Afghanistan has taken a disproportionately high toll on its religious minority communities, the issue does not appear in scholarship. The focus remains narrowly fixed on the strife between the Shia and Sunni sects of Islam and this perpetuates the assumption that Afghanistan is devoid of non-Muslims. The prevalence of State narratives and absence of first-person accounts from the Afghan Sikh and Hindu community has meant that the violation of religious freedom of non-Muslim religious minorities in Afghanistan has not been fully recognized and therefore remains incapable of being addressed.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Asha Marie Kaur Sawhney: Stories from Delhi of Afghan Sikh Refugees' Forced Migration, Survival, and Adaptation to a New Land

#### 4. DEMOGRAPHY, RIGHTS, STATE AND SOCIETAL TREATMENT AND ATTITUDES

- 4.1 Due to the paucity of firsthand accounts of non-Muslim religious minorities, State narratives obtained from official or representative sources contradict the common knowledge held by the said minorities. For example, the USSD IRF 2015 Report states there were 11 Gurdwaras in Afghanistan.
- 4.2 However, a memo of 6 August 2018 to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) from the Gurdwara Guru Nanak Darbar, (Afghan Ekte Cultural Society) of the UK, says there are 64 Sikh Gurdwaras and 27 Hindu Mandirs in Afghanistan.
- 4.3 The recent spate of terror attacks has ignited the very reasonable fear of a return of societal ill-treatment and discrimination against Afghani Sikhs and Hindus as experienced during the height of the Taliban regime. The Memo described life under the Taliban as follows:
- The situation in Afghanistan began to change in April 1992 when the Mujaheddin came to Afghanistan. The Taliban took over the movement in 1996 at Kandhar and moved to Kabul in 1997.
  - The Taliban wanted to make Afghanistan an Islamic country by converting Sikhs/Hindus into the Islam faith.
  - The Taliban began to inflict religious persecution on the Afghan Sikhs in numerous ways.
  - Every Friday, Sikhs were not allowed to open their shops. They were expected to join prayers with the Taliban in Mosques.
  - Those who resisted, were physically tortured and beaten up.
  - Young Sikhs were not allowed to go to school. Their long hair was pulled and they were humiliated.
  - Sikhs were not permitted to go to their religious places for daily prayers. Devoted Sikhs began to spend most of their times with their families in very limited area of the Sikh Gurdwara compound.
  - The young Sikh and Hindu girls were kidnapped and were forced to marry Muslims. Taliban usually paid for brides.
  - Sikhs were not allowed to cremate their dead ones openly. Sadly, they were forced to cremate within the Gurdwara compound.
  - The authorities wouldn't entertain any complaints against Muslims. If found out, Sikhs were punished even more for complaining.
- 4.4 Even after the Taliban were pushed back by the NATO–ISAF troops, Sikhs and Hindus continue to receive adverse societal treatment and attitude.
- 4.5 Pritpal Singh, an Afghan Sikh living in the UK, in his documentary 'Mission Afghanistan', based on his travels and interviews with Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan in 2012,<sup>4</sup> describes life in Afghanistan as follows:

*“There is fear and desperation in their empty eyes. They have no livelihood and no work; and their growing children receive no education. Their daughters do not have much hope of finding suitable matches; and they are not certain where the next meal*

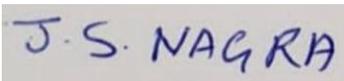
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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0h11jAyO0zg>

would come from. Many women and children live in Gurdwaré, (Sikh place of worship) relying on the free kitchen. These are Sikh women with children, widows and families left behind in a war-riven Afghanistan. The situation of women is made worse because women are confined to walled enclosures and cannot go out to work. Even Gurdwaré of great historical significance are in a state of neglect and disrepair.”

- 4.6 UK writer Inderjeet Singh says in his book, “Rawail Singh<sup>5</sup> summed up the miseries of the community (in an Al Jazeera interview in 2016): “There is only so much a community can tolerate. We can’t practice our faith openly, our children can’t go to school because of harassment; we can’t even cremate our dead without being stoned by the public.”<sup>6</sup>

Yours truly,



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<sup>5</sup> Rawail Singh was one of the 12 Sikh leaders killed in the 1 July suicide bombing in Jalalabad

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/12/decline-afghanistan-hindu-sikh-communities-161225082540860.html>