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## **The UN appoints a Special Rapporteur to monitor human rights in Afghanistan**

***The one-year position will have to "seek, receive, examine and act on information from relevant stakeholders, make recommendations, support and advice to civil society".***

**Evangelical Focus (08.10.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3AxqfDo> - The United Nations Human Rights Council appointed this Thursday a Special Rapporteur to monitor the situation of human rights in Afghanistan for a period of one year.**

The resolution, **brought by the European Union despite opposition from China, Russia and Pakistan**, passed with 28 votes in favour, 5 against and 14 abstentions.

The resolution also calls for an **"immediate end to all human rights violations and abuses of international humanitarian law in Afghanistan"**, and condemns discrimination against women and girls, including forced marriages, calling "for an inclusive and representative government".

### **Several duties**

The rapporteur will "inter alia, **seek, receive, examine and act on information from all relevant stakeholders pertaining to the situation of human rights in Afghanistan**".

He is also in charge of **making recommendations to improve** the human rights situation; assisting in fulfilling the human rights obligations arising from international treaties that Afghanistan has ratified; and **offering support and advice to civil society**".

Furthermore, he will have to “**present a written report to the Human Rights Council** at its fifty-first session and to the General Assembly at its seventy-seventh session”.

The rapporteur is to start work in March and be supported by U.N. experts in legal analysis, forensics and women's rights, according to the EU resolution.

### **EU: “An essential step”**

“This is **an essential step to ensure continued monitoring**, through a dedicated and independent expert, and to help prevent a further deterioration of the human rights situation in Afghanistan”, pointed out Lotte Knudsen, the EU’s ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva.

He stressed that “the **rights of women and girls are of particular concern to us**. The actions of the Taliban directed against women and girls and the violation of their rights is highly worrying”.

Right after the Taliban takeover, 50 organisations had unsuccessfully urged UN member states to to “establish a fact-finding mission or similar independent investigative mechanism for Afghanistan”

In recent weeks, the EU and UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet took up the cause again.

**Pakistan's ambassador** Khalil ur Rahman Hashmi said that his country **could not support** the establishment of an “unnecessarily duplicative” special rapporteur, while **China's** diplomat Jiang Duan said that the EU **resolution had “serious defects”**.

The **Human Rights Council adopted five other texts** on the report of the Advisory Committee, equal participation in political and public affairs, human rights of older persons, right to privacy in the digital age, and the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination.

*Photo : Human Rights room of the Palace of Nations, Geneva (Switzerland). / Photo: Ludovic Cortes, Wikimedia Commons.*

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## **UN: International engagement with Afghanistan must depend on respect for religious minorities**

- **First UN resolution to explicitly call for religious freedom in Afghanistan adopted**
- **UN Human Rights Council condemns Taliban violence against religious minorities, urges states to alter their engagement with country dependent on respect for human rights**

ADF International (07.10.2021) - <https://bit.ly/30kbNIF> - Almost two months after the rapid takeover of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva has adopted a resolution to condemn, "in the strongest possible terms", the ongoing violations and abuses of human rights perpetrated in Afghanistan, including against persons belonging to religious minorities.

For the first time since the outbreak of the crisis in Afghanistan, a UN resolution has explicitly called for strict respect for freedom of religion or belief, and urged the international community to adjust their engagement with any future Afghan government depending "on respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all Afghans, including women, girls, children, and persons belonging to ethnic and religious minorities." Furthermore, in accordance with the calls of several faith-based NGOs including ADF International, the resolution, adopted by a vote of 28 "yes", 5 "no" and 14 abstentions, establishes a dedicated mechanism tasked with monitoring the situation of human rights as it develops in the country.

"Nobody should be persecuted because of their faith. In Afghanistan, members of religious minorities, including Christians, have been forced to flee a certain death or go into hiding in remote areas of the country, stranded and with no hope of rescue. We are pleased that the UN Human Rights Council has finally heard their desperate plight and heeded the appeals of faith-based organizations to join in condemning all acts of religiously motivated violence and urging full respect for freedom of religion or belief," said Giorgio Mazzoli, representing ADF International at the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

"The resolution adopted today may be viewed as limited in immediate outcome, but is a meaningful signal that the international community is not prepared to idly stand by when human rights and fundamental freedoms are put in such serious jeopardy. We now urge states to ensure its full implementation by employing every diplomatic, political, or other appropriate means to ensure that those exercising effective control are held fully accountable for their failure to respect the human rights and aspiration of the Afghan people," he continued.

### **Resolution welcomed by faith-based organisations**

The move was welcomed by a coalition of human rights organisations, including ADF International, the World Evangelical Alliance, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, the World Baptist Alliance, CAP Freedom of Conscience and the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission among others, who have advocated for greater attention to the dire situation of religious minorities and the lack of freedom of religion or belief in Afghanistan during the negotiations of the draft resolution. According to reports, Christians on the ground have expressed that they expect to face certain death. Reports detail the execution of persons found on public transportation with Bible software found on their smartphones. Furthermore, the Taliban are already publicizing plans to "eradicate the ignorance of irreligion" by taking non-Muslim women and girls as sex slaves and forcing boys to serve as soldiers.

Today's outcome represents a marked change from the Human Rights Council's previous resolution on the situation in Afghanistan. Adopted in August, the first resolution was widely criticized for being "subdued", failing to hold the Taliban to account, and therefore representing "[more of an insult to the Afghan people than a response to the crisis](#)".

"The so-far inadequate response of the international community would only embolden those responsible for such harrowing human rights abuses to continue to act with impunity. We hope that the resolution adopted today by the Human Rights Council will

serve as a turning point for protecting those in Afghanistan facing serious threats to their lives simply because of their faith," added Mazzoli.

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## **USCIRF Conversation: Update on at-risk religious communities in Afghanistan**

**By Dr Zsuzsa-Anna Ferenczy for *Human Rights Without Frontiers***

HRWF (08.10.2021) - On 6 October the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom held a virtual event discussing religious communities at extreme risk of persecution in Afghanistan since the Taliban seized control on August 15, 2021. Moderated by Dwight Bashir, Director of Outreach and Policy at USCIRF, the event brought together a panel of experts including Palwasha Kakar, Interim Director at the United States Institute of Peace and Krish O'Mara Vignarajah, President and CEO of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan US federal government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). USCIRF uses international standards to monitor violations of religious freedom or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress.

The online discussion explored ways the U.S. government and international community can protect and assist at-risk Afghans in the wake of the Taliban's takeover.

The Taliban's imposition of its strict interpretation of Sunni Islam poses a grave threat to all Afghans of differing interpretations and other faiths or beliefs. Since taking control of the country in August, the Taliban has intimidated, threatened, and targeted leaders from religious minority communities. The already small Afghan Hindu and Sikh communities are nearly extinct, and the last Jew in Afghanistan fled the country in September. Hazara Shi'a Muslims, Christians, Ahmadis, and Baha'is face dire consequences at the hands of the Taliban and ISIS-K.

The panelists agreed that the situation in Taliban's Afghanistan is increasingly alarming. In her intervention, **Palwasha Kakar of the US Institute of Peace** contextualized some of the religious communities in Afghanistan, including the Hindu and the Sikh, who have a long history in the country. The Taliban have banned their activities of worship and they have been facing systemic discrimination, like all religious minorities in Afghanistan. Historically they have not been given equal right to education and have been facing kidnappings and assassinations. In her recommendations, the USIP representative urged that the global community seek to ensure that religious minorities are treated like all Afghans, are allowed to worship freely, that Taliban stop all criminal activities against Sikhs and Hindu, put an end to targeted kidnappings and the attacks on temples and shrines, return land and confiscated homes and protect the cultural heritage sites of all religious minorities.

**Krish O'Mara Vignarajah of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service** spoke of the evacuation and resettlement of Afghans in the US. Since 2001, 97,000 of Afghans were resettled. For the future, the Congress should pass a bipartisan Afghan Adjustment Act to ensure that those coming with a temporary status have access to green cards. There is now an opportunity to resettle religious minorities, the expert stressed. The Adjustment Act concerns those who entered the US on humanitarian parole, which is a

temporary status that allows for admissions into the country. Providing asylum is not sufficient. The US has a moral obligation to provide protection and establish protection for the particularly vulnerable. The Afghans who make it into the US have undergone trauma, and continue to grapple with anxiety, just as they face anti-immigrant sentiment in their new home. The international community has an important role to play in this process and should work together with local partners on the ground, including women, to protect those at risk and to offset the ongoing violations, experts stressed.

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## Taliban ban Helmand barbers from trimming beards

**BBC News (26.09.2021) - <https://bbc.in/2WjSbMO> -The Taliban have banned hairdressers in Afghanistan's Helmand province from shaving or trimming beards, saying it breaches their interpretation of Islamic law.**

Anyone violating the rule will be punished, Taliban religious police say.

Some barbers in the capital Kabul have said they also received similar orders.

The instructions suggest a return to the strict rulings of the group's past tenure in power, despite promises of a milder form of government.

Since taking power last month, the Taliban have carried out harsh punishments on opponents. On Saturday, [the group's fighters shot dead four alleged kidnappers](#) and their bodies were hung in the streets of the western city of Herat.

In a notice posted on salons in southern Helmand province, Taliban officers warned that hairdressers must follow Sharia law for haircuts and beards.

"No one has a right to complain," the notice, which was seen by the BBC, read.

"The fighters keep coming and ordering us to stop trimming beards," one barber in Kabul said. "One of them told me they can send undercover inspectors to catch us."

Another hairdresser, who runs one of the city's biggest salons, said he received a call from someone claiming to be a government official. They instructed him to "stop following American styles" and not to shave or trim anyone's beard.

During the Taliban's first stint in power from 1996 to 2001, the hardline Islamists banned flamboyant hairstyles and insisted that men grow beards.

But since then, clean-shaven looks have become popular and many Afghan men have gone to salons for fashionable cuts.

But the barbers, who have not been named to protect their safety, say the new rules are making it hard for them to make a living.

"For many years my salon was somewhere for young people to shave as their wish and look trendy," one told the BBC. "There is no point continuing this business."

"Fashion salons and barbers are becoming forbidden businesses," another said. "This was my job for 15 years and I don't think I can continue."

Another barber in Herat said that although he had not received an official order, he had stopped offering beard trims.

"Customers don't shave their beards [because] they don't want to be targeted by the Taliban fighters in the streets. They want to blend in and look like them."

Despite slashing his prices for a cut, his business has dried up. "Nobody cares about their style or hair fashion," he said.

*Photo : GETTY IMAGES image caption,After the Taliban left power, hair salons became increasingly popular among Afghan men*

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## « The Taliban killed my parents »

By Raquel Martin and Fionn Shiner

**Aid to the Church in Need (17.09.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3CHwGoE> - An Afghan Christian, whose parents were killed by the Taliban when he was eight, has given fresh insight into what Christians can expect following the extremist group's takeover.**

Speaking to Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), Ali Ehsani, a 38-year-old lawyer now based in Italy, explained that the Taliban was merciless when it found out his family were Christian.

*He said: "People eventually discovered that we were Christians. One day, I came home from school to find that the Taliban had destroyed our home and killed my parents. Me and my brother were forced to flee Afghanistan. He was 16 years old and I was eight. "The journey took five years...It was a harrowing trip that took us through Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and Greece, until we reached Italy. My brother died along the way."*

**Before his parents' death, Mr Ehsani said his family's faith was kept secret.**

He said: "When I was eight years old, I went to school and my classmates asked me why my father did not go to the mosque to pray. I went home and asked my father and he said, 'Who said that?'"

*"My father impressed upon me that I was to tell no one that we were Christians. My father explained that Christians went to church. However, he left it at that because he was afraid that I would go out and talk about our faith and people would find out about us."*

Once in Italy, Mr Ehsani befriended a Christian family in Afghanistan and supported them, although eventually the Taliban discovered them too and they had to leave the country.

They are now also in Italy.

**He said: "I sent them videos of Holy Mass or live-streamed the services for them on my mobile phone...they were so deeply touched that they wept.**

"[However], while watching one of the broadcasts of Holy Mass, they had turned up the television so that the entire family would be able to hear it. Through this, a neighbour discovered that they were Christians and betrayed them.

*"The father was arrested and that was the last they ever heard of him. The family was forced to flee and hid away in a kind of bunker, paying a guard to protect them. Thanks to the Italian and Vatican authorities, we were able to get them out of the country.*

*"The first time they were able to attend Mass, they were so overcome that they could only cry... And they said, 'After having lived in the dark for so many years as secret Christians, it is like being reborn.'"*

Photo: With image of Ali Ehsani (© Aid to the Church in Need)

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## **Afghan Christian's plea to CNA: 'You are my last hope'**

By Shannon Mullen

Catholic News Agency (08.09.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3yXeQM8> - He says the Taliban executed his father. And his brother. Now, they are hunting for him.

"Please do something," he wrote in a plea to CNA.

He is a young Afghan, one of countless thousands still desperate to escape his country.

He is a doubly marked man. First, because he briefly worked for the U.S. military and other allied forces. Second, because he is a Muslim convert to Christianity. That is a capital crime in Afghanistan.

"I hope you save my life."

His pseudonym is Kareem. CNA can't publish his full name because of the peril he faces.

Kareem first contacted CNA Aug. 24. By that time, he had bid a painful goodbye to his family and joined throngs of other Afghan civilians at the gates to Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, the Afghan capital.

Along the way, he said, his mother called him with the news that the Taliban had killed his father and brother because both men, who were Muslim, had worked with allied forces during the war.

Kareem shared his passport and other documents with CNA to corroborate his identity. Since then, two CNA officials — Kelsey Wicks, the news outlet's operations manager, and Alejandro Bermudez, CNA's executive director — have kept in regular contact with Kareem via email and WhatsApp, an instant messaging platform, while working in concert with humanitarian aid groups, religious liberty leaders, and others to try to help him.

### **'You are my last hope'**

CNA's efforts on Kareem's behalf are part of a larger story that has unfolded behind the scenes during and after the U.S. government's chaotic air evacuation of American citizens, journalists, military personnel and endangered Afghan civilians.

More than 120,000 people were flown out of Kabul prior to the completion of the U.S. pullout Aug. 31, the U.S. government says. To date, some 40,000 Afghan refugees have arrived at U.S. military bases in the United States.

But countless other endangered Afghans, including many Christians like Kareem and others in the Taliban's crosshairs, **were left behind.**

In the frenzy leading up to the Biden administration's Aug. 31 exit deadline, Afghan civilians and their advocates turned to aid groups, well-connected insiders, and anyone else they could think of asking for help, before it was too late.

Their questions followed a similar script. *Do you know anyone who can help? What about **Glenn Beck's planes?** What do you know about the **Pineapple Express?***

"We're getting desperate calls, either from Afghanistan or from people who are getting them from Afghanistan, and we're all reaching out to all of our contacts," Susan Yoshihira, a former U.S. Navy helicopter pilot who heads a non-profit humanitarian organization, the **American Council on Women, Peace, and Security,** told CNA Sept. In many instances, this fevered networking has yielded positive results.

A group of nuns from the Missionaries of Charity and the disabled Afghan children they cared for **were rescued and flown to Italy,** for example. And an **Afghan high school girls robotics team** managed to make it to Qatar, and some all the way to Mexico. Yet in the tense countdown to the final U.S. pullout, such happy outcomes were offset by the gnawing realization that there simply wasn't enough time or back-channel leverage to help countless others like Kareem.



"Everybody's exhausted," Yoshihira said. "They haven't slept, they're tired, they're fraught, they're getting frantic, desperate emails."

Kareem sent one of those desperate pleas to CNA.

"Please help me," he wrote. "I have no one without you. You are my last hope."

### **Helping a 'brother in Christ'**

Helping Kareem is complicated for a number of reasons.

While he worked at a U.S. military base, he was employed there for less than the one year of service time required to receive a **Special Immigrant Visa** for Afghans who were employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government.

And even if he had worked the necessary time frame and had all the required documents to prove it, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul that was processing visa requests has closed.

Additionally, it is possible Kareem could make a case for what is called a Priority 2 (or P-2) visa, which applies to vulnerable "minority populations," among others, but that eligibility category does not explicitly mention Christians or other religious minorities, a fact that has sparked widespread criticism.

For Wicks, CNA's operations manager, Kareem's plight lent a deeply personal dimension to the raw humanitarian disaster she saw unfolding in the news.

"This man is our brother in Christ, and in his humanity, and he deserves all the love, the time, the attention in assisting him to safety that any member of our family would," Wicks explained.

Kareem's pleas to CNA coincided with rising aggravation with the Biden administration among refugee advocates for what they saw as a lack of resolve to help vulnerable Christians get out of Afghanistan.

"I've got a list of hundreds of individuals desperate to get out ... now being hunted by the Taliban or other groups," Sam Brownback, the Trump administration's religious freedom ambassador, **told** Real Clear Politics last week.

Two charities headed by conservative commentator Glenn Beck, The Nazarene Fund and Mercury One, raised more than \$28 million to charter 20 airliners capable of ferrying thousands of Afghan Christians to safety.

But Beck **repeatedly charged** that officials within the State Department and the U.S. military were obstructing the airlift, though he said that the charities still managed to fly some 5,100 Afghan Christians and other civilians to countries other than the United States. Beck's **rescue claims** have not been independently verified.

More recently, others have made similar allegations about State Department interference in charter flight rescue operations. A Sept. 6 **report** by Fox News cited three aid group officials who said they have been unable to secure the necessary approval from the State Department to land charter flights in a nearby country.

And Rep. Rep. Dan Crenshaw, R-Texas, who served on a Navy SEAL team in Afghanistan, made the same claim in a series of tweets last week.

The State Department has denied that it is obstructing refugee charter flights, and on Sept. 7 Secretary of State Anthony Blinken pledged to assist non-government organizations and other groups working to transport Afghan civilians out of the country. Yet Blinken acknowledged that the logistics of doing so have become more difficult since the U.S. withdrawal.

"Without personnel on the ground, we can't verify the accuracy of manifests, the identities of passengers, flight plans, or aviation security protocols. So this is a challenge, but one we are determined to work through. We're conducting a great deal of diplomacy on this as we speak," Blinken said during a visit to a refugee staging facility in Doha, Qatar.

Stuck outside the Kabul airport's Abbey Gate, the main checkpoint for evacuees, Kareem was convinced prior to the Aug. 31 deadline that his life hinged on getting on one of the U.S. military and civilian airplanes he watched taking off, one by one, some only half-full.

"Please help me," he wrote in his first email to CNA.

"I will be shot or hang(ed) I don't know but talibaans looking also for afghans converted to christians. They will find me. I am begging you for help, any kind of help. I don't want to die. Save my life." (CNA has edited some of the punctuation in his messages for clarity.)

On the morning of Aug. 27, Wicks was exchanging messages with Kareem when she began receiving news bulletins about a suicide bombing at the Abbey Gate, the same location where Kareem was waiting for a miracle.

"There has been a blast at the airport," Wicks wrote.

"Are you okay?"

"[Kareem] are you there?"

There was no response.

The suicide bomb attack by a regional affiliate of the Islamic State, ISIS-K, killed 13 U.S. service members and more than 100 Afghans. Scores more were injured.

An hour passed with no word from Kareem. Then two. Then three.

Wicks feared the worst.

Finally, a new message flashed on her laptop screen.

"Yes I here still hoping after blast on refugees gate. I was on that gate at morning."

"Oh my gosh," Wicks wrote back. "I thought you were dead."

"No I got lucky or maybe your prayer," Kareem replied. "I would send pictures but talibaans beating people."

Hours later, Wicks received a voice message from Kareem. He said he was hiding in the corner of a building near the airport.

In the brief recording, his weak voice is shot through with loneliness and fear.

"I am so hopeless that there is no one coming for me, to help me and save my life," he said.

### **'What will they do to me?'**

Kareem's despair deepened as the hours and days passed by, with no fresh hope of rescue.

In one especially trying period, Kareem developed a fever and began to consider surrendering himself to the Taliban.

"Please do some thing," he wrote.

"Does Christian Life matters or not," he asked. "I am suffering every hour every day. I don't know what Jesus decided for me."

Wicks and Bermudez tried to encourage him to hold on, and continued reaching out to their contacts. "We keep working and fighting. Stay hopeful, brother," Bermudez wrote.

But Kareem was terrified. His mind fixated on rumors that the Taliban were torturing people with what he called "skin punishments." At one point, Taliban soldiers were whipping people outside the airport gates with cables, the Wall Street Journal **reported**. "Taliban Wolves are around me. They will hunt and eat me," he wrote. "My heart is swelling. What will these animals do to me? Oh god," he said.

"I am a human. I have rights. I am a human," he wrote. "I'm not ready to die. I want to live my life."

Wicks said later compared her experiences communicating with Kareem with keeping vigil at the bedside of a loved one preparing for death.

"Each of us is called to accompany the Suffering Christ. It might be someone you're close to, someone in your family," she said.

"God, in his Providence, asked that it be this person, 5,000 miles away."

It was difficult "to encounter such darkness and to see the depths of this evil so closely, that a man would be hunted for his faith," she said.

Kareem, for his part, clung to his human lifeline. "Please just stay with me [a] little more. Just talk to me," he wrote.

Kareem remains in periodic contact with CNA, but it is now too dangerous for him to communicate on WhatsApp, especially in English.

Wicks and Bermudez continue to advocate for him, but there is little else they can offer him now other than their prayers.

Kareem told Wicks and Bermudez he is grateful for their efforts to help him.

"You two [are] keeping me hopeful and strong these scariest days of my life," he wrote.

"I wish Jesus give me more life to meet you one day," he continued.

"I will never blame you for this. You tried everything possible I know," he told them.

"I love you two and others who tried to help me."

Most recently, Kareem sent a video message to CNA, asking that it be made public if he should die.

"It is hard to survive in this hell, because this land is not for Christians," he says in the nearly 8-minute-long video.

He says that the Taliban have the names of Christian converts whom they are hunting.

"I know I am one on that list," he says. "But I'm not afraid. Jesus is with me ... Jesus is watching me."

Photo: Taliban fighters gather along a street during a rally in Kabul on August 31, 2021 as they celebrate after the U.S. pulled all its troops out of the country to end a brutal 20-year war./ Hoshang Hashimi/AFP via Getty Images)

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## **Afghanistan my love**

***An elderly Italian religious who spent more than 18 years as the only Catholic priest in Afghanistan mourns for the country he came to love***



*Picture: Father Giuseppe Moretti. (Photo by GIANLUCA GASBARRI/PARALLELOZERO for LA CROIX)*

**By Loup Besmond de Senneville | Vatican City**

La Croix International (01.09.2021) – <https://bit.ly/2Ykg4EL> - On this particular morning, an elderly man opens the door of the immense building that is home to the Barnabite religious community in the center of Rome.

He is dressed in an impeccable black suit and is wearing a clerical collar.

There is nothing to suggest that for 18 years this man was the only Catholic priest in Afghanistan.

Nor that in recent hours, the heart of 82-year-old Giuseppe Moretti is overwhelmed by the news coming out of Kabul.

The city, which fell to the Taliban in mid-August, is a place he left in 2014 but never stopped loving.

This morning, with his eyes lingering over the coffee table in the small living room where he has led us, Father Moretti laments: "I am madly in love with Afghanistan. Madly in love."

"When I first set foot there, there were people waving at us on the tarmac, because the planes were attracting the curious. I looked at this crowd and I said to myself: 'Now, either you keep your presupposed western superiority and you will not understand anything about this country, or you can drop it and try to understand.' I chose the second option," he says.

### ***"There are probably Afghan Catholics. But they risk death"***

Originally from the Marches, Father Moretti experienced several different Afghanistans.

First was the country at peace, as seen during the first year of his presence, in 1977, before the coup d'état took place a year later. Only diplomats, humanitarians and technicians remained.

The priest also left the country, not knowing that he would return in 1990 for another four years. During the interim, he taught Latin and Italian literature in Florence.

When he returned to Afghanistan, the Soviet army was omnipresent at first, before the country was plunged into civil war. As in the 1970s, Father Moretti ministered in the only chapel in the city, frequented only by the international community.

No Afghans: this was one of the two conditions set by the Afghan authorities when Father Moretti's distant predecessor was sent to Kabul in the early 1930s.

The second condition?"An absolute ban on proselytizing," says the priest, the fifth Barnabite to work in Afghanistan.

"There are undoubtedly Afghan Catholics. But they risk death," he notes.

Moretti celebrated Mass each day in the country's only Catholic chapel, located within the Italian Embassy compound.

Then in 1994 a missile landed on his house.

The priest was seriously wounded and had to go back to Italy. He would not return to Afghanistan until eight years later, when Italy decided to reopen its embassy.

That was in 2002, just a few months after 9/11.

### ***The slow reconstruction of the country***

Oddly enough, for years, and despite the Taliban, the church has remained standing.

The Islamists had, however, identified the chapel.

And for good reason: the building of the religious police was located exactly on the other side of the embassy wall.

After his second return to Afghanistan, Moretti witnessed the slow reconstruction of the country.

The situation was closely followed by John Paul II, who regularly spoke of Afghanistan in his speeches.

The words of the Polish pope carried far.

When the John Paul II died, no less than seven Afghan ministers attended the memorial Mass that Moretti celebrated.

The priest continues to follow the situation in Afghanistan, hour by hour. And he does not hide his nostalgia. "Those were the most beautiful years of my priesthood," he smiles.

In his little church, "the American 5-star general" and "the Filipino house staff" rubbed shoulders.

"It was there, when it was as though we were on an island, cut off from everything, that I felt Catholicism," he recalls.

In these hours when Afghanistan has fallen like a house of cards, he also expresses his sorrow. "I have great sadness. A deep disillusionment.

For years, I hoped and saw a positive spiral of freedom and democracy. And now everything has been swept away in a few days," Moretti says.

He actually went back to Kabul briefly during the summer of 2019. His Barnabite successor asked him to fill in for a month and Moretti quickly accepted.

He left with enough money to buy 500 new benches for the school he had founded years earlier. It now had 2,500 students from kindergarten to high school.

"My sadness is that I could not reach the school from Kabul. I was prevented from doing so for security reasons," he laments.

Then there is silence. "You know, it wasn't a dazzling presence, but a silent presence.

We were little stars," he says.

"But even tiny stars can shine."

Read more at: <https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/afghanistan-my-love/14816>

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## **World Evangelical Alliance expresses concern over Afghanistan**

World Evangelical Alliance (16.08.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3ya6jVJ> - The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) expresses its deep concerns over the take-over of Afghanistan by the

Taliban who in the past have been known for persecution of religious minorities, suppression of women, drug trade and human trafficking. The WEA calls on churches and believers to pray for the country, especially for Afghan Christians and others who are vulnerable, and those who have already fled or are trying to flee abroad.

“We are very concerned about the recent developments in Afghanistan and the dire prospects for all those who do not fit within the Taliban’s view of a society. Women, who will be among those who have most to lose, will likely again be prevented from enjoying basic rights, including tertiary education, professional careers, and even freedom to move around on their own. What is less reported is the plight of religious minorities, including Christians, who have suffered severe oppression during the past twenty years and who are now at even greater risk,” said Bishop Dr. Thomas Schirmmacher, Secretary General of the WEA.

“We should not pretend as if everything was well in Afghanistan prior to the Taliban taking control of the country now. Converts from Islam have been killed in areas under the former official government, and war lords who controlled part of the country, and are now losing their power, were not much better,” Schirmmacher noted. “The Constitution of 2004 stated that Afghanistan is an Islamic Republic with Islam as its state religion, leaving no place for religious freedom in the country. In reality, all religious minorities suffer in Afghanistan and will suffer even more now – including Muslim minorities like the Shiites and those Muslims who have become followers of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>” Highlighting the complexity of the nation’s history and culture, Schirmmacher also pointed out that the media at times portray the situation too simplistically, as if the Taliban represent only a small group of insurgents imposing their will on society.

“While there has been improvements for women’s rights and other developments in recent years under the official government, these changes have not been welcomed by all Afghans. Instead, it should be noted that the backing of the Taliban in society has been much more significant than Western countries thought, with many people even voting for them in elections,” Schirmmacher said.

In addition to the oppression of religious minorities and the restrictions on women that are already being felt in many of the regions that fell to the Taliban in recent days, the country will likely again see a significant increase in illicit trade and slavery.

“Taliban finance themselves to a large extent through all kinds of criminal means, especially drug trade and human trafficking. Selling girls into sex slavery is no problem for them, especially if they do not belong to their faith community,” Schirmmacher said.

Calling on believers to pray, he said “our hearts cannot help but ache for the many Afghans who are longing for freedom but once again have to live in fear within their own nation, as well as the many who have fled to other countries as refugees leaving behind everything. Join us in prayer for our brothers and sisters in Christ that they would be protected and comforted. Scripture reminds us that we are one body in Christ and ‘if one part suffers, every part suffers with it’ (1 Corinthians 12:26a). And let us pray for new hope for the whole nation that is facing a very dark moment at this time.”

<sup>1</sup>*Shiites are the largest Muslim minority, especially among the Hazaras and Qizilbash. For decades, the Taliban sought to eradicate the Hazaras in the regions it controlled, killing thousands of them for no reason. Many of them will now come under Taliban rule for the first time, and among those are also many Christian converts from the Hazara who will face even greater risk. Besides them, the vast number of adherents of Muslim sects like the Sufi order Ahl-ehaqq and non-Muslim religions have left the country by now. Those staying behind, however, live in constant danger and include Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Baha’i, Zoroastrians, Christians, atheists and others holding a secular worldview. Among all of them, the greatest threat is directed against those who changed their religion – a basic human right in international law – which are mostly Muslims who became followers of Jesus. Many of them belong to smaller ethnic groups that are already discriminated*

*against by the Pashtuns, a Sunni Muslim ethnic group that historically dominated Afghanistan.*

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## **Afghan police say Kabul mosque bombing kills 12 worshippers**

By Tameen Akhgar

AP News (14.05.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3w7iQJ2> - A bomb ripped through a mosque in northern Kabul during Friday prayers, killing 12 worshippers, and wounding 15, Afghan police said.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the bombing, the latest in a surge in violence as U.S. and NATO troops have begun their final withdrawal from the country, after 20 years of war.

According to Afghan police spokesman, Ferdaws Faramarz, the bomb exploded as prayers had begun. The mosque's imam, Mofti Noman, was among the dead, the spokesman said and added that the initial police investigation suggests the imam may have been the target.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid denied any insurgent connection to the mosque attack, condemning it and accusing Afghanistan's intelligence agency of being behind the explosion.

Both the Taliban and government routinely blame each other for attacks. The attackers are rarely identified, and the public is seldom informed of the results of investigations into the many attacks in the capital.

One worshipper, Muhibullah Sahebzada, said he had just stepped into the building when the explosion went off. Stunned, he heard the sound of screams, including those of children, as smoke filled the mosque.

Sahebzada said he saw several bodies on the floor, and at least one child was among the wounded. It appeared the explosive device had been hidden inside the pulpit at the front of the mosque, he added.

"I was afraid of a second explosion so I came immediately to my home" he said.

An image circulating on social media shows three bodies lying on the floor of the mosque.

The explosion comes on the second day of a three-day cease-fire announced by the Taliban for the Muslim holiday this week of Eid al-Fitr, which follows the fasting month of Ramadan. The Afghan government has also said it would abide by a truce during the holiday.



So far, many of the attacks in Kabul have been claimed by the Islamic State group's local affiliate, though the Taliban and government routinely trade blame.

Last week, a powerful car bombing attack in Kabul killed over 90 people, many of them students leaving a girls' school. The Taliban denied involvement and condemned the attack.

Earlier this week, U.S. troops left southern Kandahar Air Base, where some NATO forces still remain. At the war's peak, more than 30,000 U.S. troops were stationed in Kandahar, the Taliban heartland. The base in Kandahar was the second largest U.S. base in Afghanistan, after Bagram north of Kabul.

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