



The Afghan Rug Shop owner James Wilthew poses for a photograph outside his shop Hebden Bridge, northern England.



The Afghan Rug Shop owner James Wilthew arranges a display at his shop in Hebden Bridge. — AFP photos

# UK businesses fear for Afghan rug weavers after Taliban takeover

Overseas businesses selling colorful handwoven rugs and vivid hand-blown glass from Afghanistan are concerned for their suppliers as the Taliban's takeover of the country threatens those with links to the West. British businessman James Wilthew has built up close ties with Afghan rug weavers and sellers, buying the sought-after carpets directly from the northern provinces, where the industry is traditionally based. The ex-serviceman sells the carpets at his shop in Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire in northern England and estimates that his company, The Afghan Rug Shop, supports about 200 families. A share of the proceeds goes to Afghanaid, a British charity supporting people in Afghanistan.

Now he is battling to fly out contacts he believes will be Taliban targets due to their association with a former NATO base in the region. "As a result of that, they are now in immediate danger," as they do not fall under the British government criteria for evacuation, Wilthew told AFP. He said

Reconstruction Team, set up to help development projects.

Asked if Islamist hardliners could target those who worked with him due to his UK military background, he said: "Yes, of course". The Taliban could say, "You've been working for Mr James", he said. "It's just the association." "I'm not necessarily how sure the Taliban will go with these things: we just don't know what the spectrum of danger is."

#### Major export commodity

Afghan rugs are a major commodity and the country's second largest non-agricultural export, according to the World Trade Organization. Textiles are by far the most significant Afghan import to the UK, worth some £2.4 million (\$3.3 million, 2.8 million euros) per year, government figures show. The ancient carpet trade existed under the previous Taliban regime, which ruled Afghanistan with an iron fist from 1996 until they were ousted in the US-led invasion in 2001.



A customer browses at The Afghan Rug Shop in Hebden Bridge.



Afghan scarves are arranged for sale at The Afghan Rug Shop in Hebden Bridge.



Afghan rugs are arranged for sale at The Afghan Rug Shop.

he was frustrated by the British government's response, despite an emotive emergency debate on the crisis in parliament and urgent calls for help. "Nothing happens, there's been no action," he said, warning: "Government bureaucracy will result in the death of thousands of people." The former RAF officer worked in Afghanistan in 2004 on the UK Provincial

The uncertainty and chaos since the return of the hardline Islamists was "a temporary issue", said Wilthew. "Under the Taliban regime, that trade (in textiles) will continue, they need the tax from that business, the employment," he added. "It's their export commodity, it's how they make an income." Most Afghan carpets are exported via neighboring Pakistan, but

Wilthew is unusual in dealing directly with artisans and traders inside the country. That could force him to change his business model, possibly using a middleman in Pakistan, and switching from US dollars if the greenback is banned in Afghanistan.

He is also unlikely to be able to continue using international shipping and delivery companies DHL and FedEx for delivery, he added. "Acquiring rugs from Afghanistan is not a concern for me. It's not an issue, the issue is my friends," he said.

#### 'Impossible' logistics

Another high-end company that sells goods made by Afghan artisans is London-based Ishkar, which sells contemporary-design carpets, as well handblown

tumblers, jewelry and clothes.

The brand's creative director, Electra Simon, said she was in daily contact with people in Afghanistan, and "pretty much everybody is trying to leave".

"They just basically want to get out, they can't leave their houses right now," she said, adding they felt "sheer desperation" at the situation. "It's really hard: the relationships we've built up with people, seeing them in these massively tricky situations," she said. Ishkar's online shop is selling photographic prints of Afghanistan to raise funds for Emergency, which provides medical treatment to conflict victims.

The company, which works with some 30 people in the country, has removed references to Afghan partners from its website to protect them. "We want to do every-

thing possible to continue working with people in Afghanistan, if it doesn't put them at risk," she said "Some of them will be (at risk), others probably not as much because they are just traditional artisans working, so hopefully we can continue working with them."

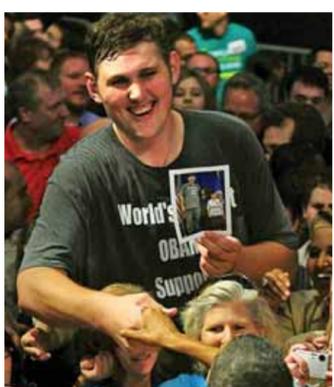
Some artisans in areas captured by the Taliban have been able to keep working, she said, although the logistics of exporting to Britain were now "completely impossible". Both she and Wilthew said the situation was still too fluid to predict, and a clearer picture will emerge in the coming weeks. "It will definitely be different for us, that's 100 percent," said Simon. — AFP



The Afghan Rug Shop owner James Wilthew photographs new arrivals on display to upload to the shop's social media accounts at his shop in Hebden Bridge.



The Afghan Rug Shop owner James Wilthew arranges a display at his shop in Hebden Bridge.



## America's tallest man dies at age 38

The tallest man in America—he stood 7 feet 8 inches (2.35 meters) — has died of a heart problem at the age of 38, his mother said on Facebook. Ukrainian-born Igor Vovkovinskiy had a condition called pituitary gigantism that

caused excessive secretion of growth hormone. His mother, who said her son died Friday in Minnesota, had brought him from their home in Ukraine in 1989 to get medical treatment at the Mayo Clinic in the northern US state.

Two surgeries saved his life but failed to stop his growth. At age 27, Guinness World Records declared Vovkovinskiy the tallest person in America. In the 2013 edition of the Eurovision song contest, Vovkovinskiy walked on stage cradling Ukraine's singer, Zlata Ognevich, in his arms. She looked tiny and doll-like. Vovkovinskiy enjoyed another moment of celebrity in 2009 when then-president Barack Obama noticed him towering above the crowd at

a political rally. Vovkovinskiy was wearing a T-shirt that called him the "World's Biggest Obama Supporter." He shook hands with the politician.

Guinness World Records says the tallest person in the world now is a Turkish man named Sultan Kösen, who is 8 feet 2 inches tall (2.51 meters). The tallest man in modern US history was Robert Wadlow, who was 8 feet 9 inches (2.72 meters). He also suffered from a growth hormone disorder, and died in 1940 at the age of 22. — AFP

